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COBALT-SERIES

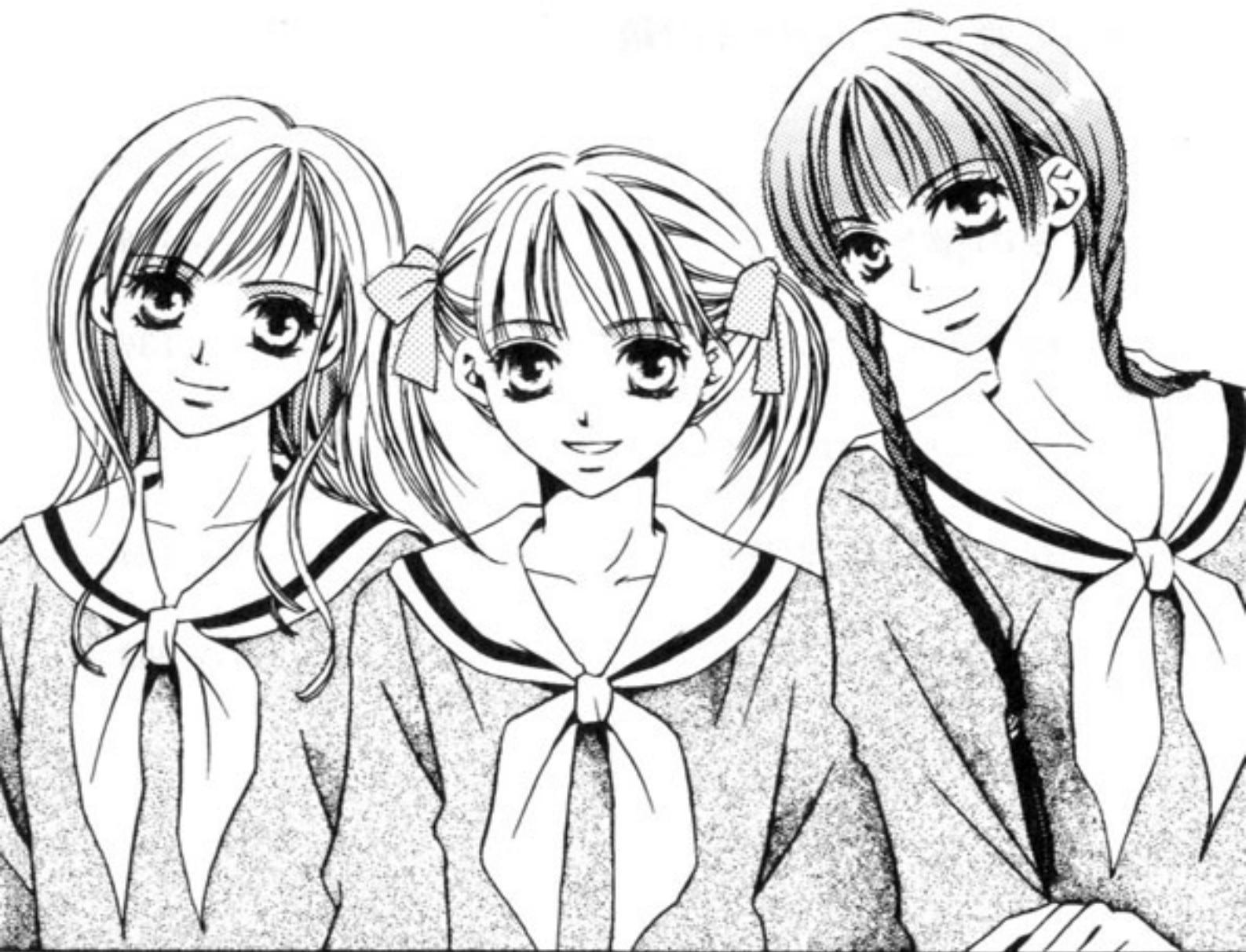
マリア様がみてる

レディ、GO!

今野緒雪

集英社

主要登場人物紹介



ロサ・ギガンティア
白薔薇さま
藤堂志摩子

ロサ・フェティダ・アン・ブトン
黄薔薇のつぼみ
島津由乃

ロサ・キナンシス・アン・ブトン
紅薔薇のつぼみ
福沢祐巳

ロサ・ギガンティア・アン・ブトン
白薔薇のつぼみ

二条乃梨子

リリアン女学園一年生
松平瞳子

小笠原祥子
紅薔薇さま

支倉令
黄薔薇さま

Volume 15

Ready, GO!

Prologue

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary’s garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-coloured school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... Such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field’s greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

The members of the Yamayurikai had assisted the Hanadera Academy school festival - many things had happened, but that was over with. Well then, next was the Lillian school festival to want to go to. But wait, there’s another random event crammed in a school’s autumn.

So, for examples of autumn.

Reading?

Eating?

No, no, the leading contender is sports.

The situation is prepared.

Bang!

Remaining Cuteness of Today's Enemy

Part 1.

“There are no other candidates?” The voice resounds in the second-year Pine Group classroom. “Okay, moving forward, we’ll take recommendations.”

From near the podium, the speaker was a personality Yumi knew well. The room was filled with a strangely floaty atmosphere. In other words - there was one person in high spirits - Rosa Foetida en Bouton, Shimazu Yoshino-san . From out of the corner of her eye, Yumi had been absentmindedly considering that friend for some time. One way or the other, what...

It’s Monday, after school.

The teacher had cut homeroom off early. Then suddenly, and with high spirits, Yoshino-san had materialized in front of the blackboard. And why, at her side, was Yamaguchi Mami of the newspaper club taking notes on the blackboard, completely unlike a ninja who would be erasing any signs.

“Okay, so coming up next week is the Sports Festival. We’ll have to gradually look through all sorts of participation to choose the players for our team.”

An unhappy “Eh-?” sounded throughout the classroom.

Yoshino-san glared at them evenly until it subsided into silence. Inside their hearts, everyone wanted to hurry back to cleaning, or to their club activities. If anyone had actually allowed that to come out of their mouths, it would only prolong this, so they remained silent, but it was written all over their faces.

Yoshino-san, Yumi had forgotten, along with Mami-san, was on the Sports Festival Executive Committee. Because there’s a time limit on the work involved with this committee, even though it is given the name Executive Committee, it differs from the others. In that sense it’s close to the School Festival Executive Committee or the Student Council Election Executive Committee.

Well, as far as each class has a distinctive personality, the second-year Pine Group was not very passionate about the Sports Festival.

Generally.

In each class, there were usually one or two people who were called all-around sports club aces, those people who would be sports heroes, no, heroines, that could be pulled into the Athletic Festival. But, unfortunately, there were no such people in this class. Not even their representative on the Executive Committee, since the person who announced her candidacy was the Yoshino-san who had never done any sports or exercise for seventeen years.

“Anyone who doesn’t object, hold up your hand.” As Yoshino-san spoke, those classmates who were talking lifted their hands. Yumi, confused, also lifted her hand. What the conclusion was, she didn’t know.

Whatever it was, about half were in favor of adopting the resolution, so Yumi put her hand up. Later she’d ask Tsutako-san to explain the contents.

When, those around her put their hands down, she did too, as she pondered. One way or another, she would have to do something.

That was, about Hosokawa Kanako-chan.

After Tuesday’s difference of opinion, in which Yumi’s onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama had gotten involved and broken up, they had essentially been separated. Yesterday’s exhibition at Hanadera Academy, as part of their school festival, had been too loud and busy to allow time for proper thought. That noise and busyness, confirming the bond of sisterhood, a joy for which there was nothing greater, was something else she was chewing on well.

If you think that it’s good that we’re so happy, that would be incorrect. To the extent that we’re are happy, there are other people who are helplessly anxious. Sachiko-sama said something similar, that it’s good to let go.

But every time, night or dawn, that she asked herself that, it was something that she couldn't do. That was the answer she came up with. "But, I'm participating in the relay with my club, so doing it twice would be a little..." Suddenly, someone behind Yumi stood and spoke, so that she turned around to see.

"The teams for the relay have nothing to do with the clubs, so please contribute to the class efforts." Yoshino-san struck back from the podium with an intense expression. Somehow the conversation about who would be on the relay had unfolded. The speaker had been Karube Itsue, who sat in the seat behind Yumi, and who was on the track and field team.

"This class, class, you're speaking of, only Yoshino-san -san doesn't have to go out for it, isn't that right?" Itsue-san smiled nastily.

Suddenly, Yoshino-san looked disturbed. "M...me, go out for relay?"

"Since you've been operated on, you've gotten stronger. I wonder why you're disputing your chance to contribute to the class. Since you're talking about participating, it'll be good. If you do, I'll consent to do it as well."

She might have thought, then, that Yoshino-san would withdraw. However, such a thing would not break her, Shimazu Yoshino-san who saw a red light as a signal to move ahead. Yumi knew this well. But few of her classmates knew Yoshino-san's true nature.

"What will you do, I wonder? Will we fight together for the Green team?"

Oh, that kind of provocation will definitely have the opposite effect. Yumi desperately tried to reach Itsue-san behind her with telepathy, but the moment passed.

"...I understand. If we consider that recommendation, then it'll be my pleasure to participate."

Uh-oh. Yoshino-san's ignited at last. Then again, when a flame flares up into an even greater blaze, there's no way to put it out. "However, since I was born, I have had no experience in a foot race. So assuming that I'm the lowest possible rank, I'll still take on this responsibility. Will that be all right?"

"If that's the case, I think it's proper if we quote you on your participation."

Through the classroom, every student held their breath and watched. The tension spread through the atmosphere of the classroom. There was no sign of the atmosphere relaxing. No one was chatting any more, everyone was watching this one-on-one match.

Those two were staring at one another with menace. Maybe, one or the other was thinking "I want to withdraw" but withdrawing would be to lose. But if one did withdraw, would victory be obtained. That was probably not true.

Because of mutual obstinacy, Yoshino-san and Itsue-san had unintentionally removed the choice for who was on the relay from the rest of the class. In other words, the battle was for "Other than these two, who would be in the relay."

"I won't forget those words." Yoshino-san writes on the right side of the blackboard "Color Opposition Relay - (2 names)" and underneath, Shimazu Yoshino-san - Karube Itsue-san with a postscript, "Everything has already been decided. Thank you for your cooperation." With this greeting, she descended from the podium.

"Wa...wait, Yoshino-san -san. Are you sure that's all right?" Yumi came running up thrusting past the people heading for the door. "Yumi-san, you shouldn't worry about others more than about yourself."

"Eh?" Looking back over her shoulders she saw the form of photography club ace Takeshima Tsutako-san.

"So, I guess you didn't notice?"

"W...what?"

“Earlier, when you raised your hand with all your heart.”

Tsutako-san pointed backwards at the blackboard with her thumb.

“Scavenger hunt race (5 names)...?”

“Below that.”

Even as she spoke, Yumi’s gaze dropped down to the previously decided line up of letters. At the bottom, number five, were the characters for “Fukuzawa Yumi.”

“No way...”

Of all the things for her to have voted on.

Part 2.

“Well?” Sachiko-sama asked, as they walked up the squeaky stairs. “What do you intend to do?”

“I’m going to do it. I don’t really have a choice not to, do I?” After the stairs had finished squeaking, Yumi answered.

After her minor shock, from which she recovered during cleaning, Yumi was, as always, heading across the grounds towards the Rose Mansion to do her Yamayurikai work. As she came out of the school building she spotted the figure of her beloved onee-sama, who she rushed up to instinctively and began to speak frantically about what had happened in homeroom.

“You know, Yumi.”

“I know. I was not paying attention in homeroom. I’ll be sure to be careful from now on.”

“Exactly. This is certainly you getting your just deserts. But,” Sachiko-sama stopped as she ascended the stairs. “That wasn’t what I was going to say.”

“Huh?”

“About Kanako-chan. I was wondering what you were thinking about doing. I heard about the money issue.”

“Money issue?”

“Yes.”

Sachiko-sama lowered her bag and leaned it against the wall. Right in front of them was the biscuit door, behind which their companions in the Yamayurikai waited. For that reason, one shouldn’t bring a conversation between sisters in. That was what was inside Sachiko-sama, one shouldn’t wonder.

So, when Yumi reached the last stair, she did just as Sachiko-sama had done. Her bag was lined up with the other.

“That must have been very difficult.” That morning, they had met in the entrance and Yumi had waved at her, which she returned with calm disregard. At lunchtime, when she had gone to the first-year Tsubaki Group classroom, she had seen her smiling at someone, but when she saw Yumi, she did an about face and ended that. She had not been able to find a way to reconcile this with a discussion.

When the waving hand was lowered, and the smile disappeared from a cheek that looked like it had a cramp, Yumi was thoroughly confused. This was exactly the issue she didn’t want to chew on.

“Huh?” But, Onee-sama felt that there wasn’t any reasonable settlement to come to on this. Nevertheless, it seemed she meant just that. “Yes, exactly.” Sachiko-sama looked down with a small smile. “My thoughts on the matter haven’t changed, particularly. You don’t have to abide by my words, just because I said something. In this case, I respect Yumi’s desire to lose Kanako-chan’s ill feelings.”

“Onee-sama.” Opposites as they were, in one thing they were the same - each’s gaze projected upon the other the thought that she was an important person to the other.

“You want to reconcile, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Yumi answered clearly.

Although right now it was bad, and probably would never be the same between them, she wanted them to at least be able to greet each other naturally, and speak to each other naturally. She couldn’t bear to continue as an invisible existence in Kanako’s eyes.

“Then, put some effort into it. Don’t just say that you want your feelings to be reconciled.”

Onee-sama’s fingers lay heavily on her shoulder. That she neither abandoned nor coddled her, gave Yumi a measure of courage. Magic in the palm of her hand.

Even if the words stay inside Sachiko-sama and are yet to be spoken, still, it's like they wash away any uneasiness from her spirit. Was there any way to pay her back for this, except to never stop following her with all her heart and, at that moment she stood ready to do just that, right?

"Then, when you're done, you're welcome to come back. My arms are spread open, waiting for you." With her half-lidded smile, Sachiko-sama looked as holy and beautiful as Maria-sama. Just from looking at her, Yumi could feel herself becoming warmer. What kind of person am I to be thought so important by this person?

However, unfortunately, as there was neither equipment here that could measure this, or measurements for it, she couldn't truly say. Anyway, Yumi took Sachiko-sama's left arm and squeezed it tightly.

"I love you, Onee-sama." Then she turned away and looked over the banister.

"Ah, Yumi?"

"Thank you very much for the advice. I shall strike right away."

Informing her in a loud voice, Yumi ran down the stairs. Strike while the iron is hot. Today was a good day for resolution.

With Sachiko-sama behind her pushing, go Yumi. With oomph, go.

When she alighted on the first floor, she accelerated. Into the foyer, open the door and outside she went.

The other party. Standing at the top of the stairs, where she had been left Sachiko-sama was saying, "You left so suddenly, but you never said what you intended to do."

Phew, she sighed heavily and opened the biscuit door. Then she retraced her steps and picked up the two bags that had been left behind and brought them into the room.



Part 3.

By now, it was likely that she had already gone home, she realized as she entered the school building.

Kanako had been in conversation with her classmate Noriko, not having club activities to do. She did not conclude that this was the method conceived for separating Yumi from her **Haigorei** on Saturdays. It was simply the correct activity for the “going home club.”

Yumi braked as she passed the first year Tsubaki Group classroom, changing her course. Her pace changed at the end to something more “hurry it up” than the first part, which had been more relaxed. Because it was time for many school events, both classrooms and hallways were visibly full with the figures of students. As she reached the shoe lockers for the First-Year Tsubaki Group, she spotted a figure she knew.

“Tōko-chan.”

“...Ah.” With a loose expression, Tōko added, “Yumi-sama.”

“What’s wrong?” Just before she had a loose expression her face had been grim. It looked as if she had been looking outside the entrance. “Nothing.” She muttered curtly and made to leave. She was stopped by Yumi calling out.

“Ah, Tōko-chan.”

However...

Although she had been released from the issue with Kanako, Yumi was still uneasy about Tōko-chan.

“Mm?” Tōko-chan looked back over her shoulder, on the side she was called to stop from.

“Where is Kanako-chan’s locker, I wonder?” Yumi inquired.

“Kanako, you say?” Tōko-chan raised her face with decidedly ungentle muscles. In front of Yumi, although Tōko-chan rarely shows any signs of carefree good humor, this seemed to be exceptionally hateful. “What are you bringing Hosokawa Kanako up for?” Again, the full name, with honorific omitted.

So saying, she remembered that Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan are not particularly close. So, she's discussing a natural enemy. "Nothing. I wondered if she's already gone home, if I could find her shoes... It's fine, I can look for her myself, sorry for calling out and stopping you."

The god you don't touch can't curse you. Here, it's just better if Tōko-chan isn't provoked. Yumi looked at the names written on the locker covers one by one to confirm the right one.

Noticing the situation, Tōko-chan said, "Yumi-sama, it would really be better for you to stop concerning yourself with that person. That's the one. Oh, bother!" Turning towards the exit, she spat the words out.

"That's it? Oh... That one?"

There was no answer.

As Yumi said thank you, she ran off. Having flown away from the shoe lockers, she didn't notice until she was outside the entrance, that she was still wearing her indoor shoes. There was no helping it, she couldn't return to change them now. Having learned from Tōko-chan with such effort, there was no excuse - this moment was "Go.".

The pleats of her skirts rustled, her sailor collar flapped. This is her opportunity. "Go - Go."

Slightly ahead of Tōko-chan, turning from the statue of Maria-sama, walking towards the school gate, is a tall, slender figure with long black hair. Without actually looking for it, that figure is immediately apparent to her.

Yumi slowed her speed, watching from behind for a little while Kanako-chan walked down the tree-lined path. This situation is a complete 180 from previously. A few days go, Yumi had walked down this path, conscious that Kanako-chan was behind her. Before that, she had walked without ever being conscious of her.

Twenty meters, then thirty, then the distance was nothing and she was walking right behind her. And Yumi once again within her heart asked if she wants to make up?

The answer is yes. With no doubt. Therefore, she'll go with Onee-sama's advice, that if her feelings are not conveyed, there can be no resolution.

As the distance shrank, she gauged when would be the right timing to call out. However.

“Ah, Rosa Chinensis en bouton. Good day. Are you alone?” Unluckily, a group of first-years saw her, and Kanako-chan was made aware of her presence. Although she tended to forget it, Yumi is a school celebrity when she comes into view.

As she expected, Kanako-chan ran away. Maybe to say that she ran away is a faulty expression, but she did turn her head to confirm that it was really Yumi and having done so, increased her speed and the distance between them.

“Ah... Kanako-chan.” She stretched out her hand, but couldn't reach. Right off, Kanako's legs were much longer, and then Yumi was surrounded by six or so first-years, making her unable to follow. She just managed to shake them off and run to the bus station when she saw the bus for M station. In the middle of the students getting on, she saw Kanako's figure.

She'd have to hurry. As she began the dash, Yumi noticed it again. Her hands were empty. She didn't have her pass, and to make matters worse, she was wearing indoor slippers. After another step, Yumi ceased to follow.

“...No way.”

In front of her, she saw the bus take off, and thought reproachfully that there was no way she could have done it.

Part 4.

“Please, a favor...”

“Well now. What can I do for you, Yumi-sama?” Noriko-chan inquired in her usual cool tone.

The next day. Between the second and third hours is time for recess. In revenge for yesterday, Yumi is raiding the first-year Tsubaki group classroom. By coincidence, it was Noriko-chan who undertook the task of opening the door, hence her asking.

“I have come with some business for Hosokawa Kanako-san. Please let her know.”

Today’s Yumi is not the usual friendly, like a salesperson is friendly, Yumi. Stretching her spine, drawing her voice from her abdomen and her gaze firm. Her battle face is modeled after Ogasawara Sachiko-sama, playing the part of a powerful upperclassman, with no chinks in her armor.

“Of course. Please wait.”

Quickly sensing this, Noriko made a small bow and returned into the classroom. Her sharp wits were a savior in such a situation. If she had required an explanation as to why Yumi was taking such great pains to affect a Sachiko-sama-like demeanor, Yumi was sure that they whole image would collapse with a clatter.

“Good day, Rosa Chinensis en bouton.”

“Thank you for your hard work every day, Yumi-sama.” The students entering and leaving greeted her as they came alongside Yumi.

“Good day.” She answered, forcing herself to make a watery smile with her lips. This is one of Shimako’s affectations. She probably hadn’t executed it well, but she didn’t have a mirror, so couldn’t know. And with that, Kanako-chan unwillingly appeared.

“What?” Her face has ‘unpleasant necessity’ written all over it. Because a classmate had intermediated, she couldn’t ignore this or run away.

“I would like to talk with you.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Maybe you don’t, but I do. Please listen.”

When an upperclassman asks something directly it’s not that easy to not do it. Here, she couldn’t just decide to blow it off. One should face the enemy. But she was not one to yield to authority peacefully. “Unfortunately, I’m getting ready for the next lesson, so now is a little...” Kanako-chan’s glance looked back into the classroom - every one of the first-year Tsubaki Group was casually watching the turn of events, from the back of the room where out of the lockers or from the hooks on the side of the desks, they were taking things out of large bags. It looked like was gym next period.

“Then, let’s make some time when it would be okay. Lunchtime, or after school, whenever you choose is fine.” Yumi did not feel that the short recess between one class and another would be enough time to talk. The purpose of this visit was to extract a promise of a time to talk. Now wasn’t good? Then when do you wish.

“Today?”

“Yes.”

Here, “Whenever you’d like” would be a compromise, but now was the time to set the time and place, because otherwise with “soon” and “later” it would get postponed again and again.

“If it’s convenient, how about tomorrow?”

“No.” Kanako-chan was finally reaching resignation.

“Then decide. Lunchtime or after school. Which is it?”

“After school.”

“The same place we met on Saturday?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll take that as a promise.” Bringing the conversation to a close, Yumi turned and looked out over the classroom. “Everyone here is a witness. Don’t forget.” Although they all pretended to be busy with other things, the students could see everything. Those who were following the situation and forgot themselves carelessly nodded, “Uh-huh.”

With that, if Kanako-chan tried to run away, it would be a major thing. Because of the *sœur* tradition in Lillian Girl's High School, relationships between upper and under classmen were rather strict. First-year Kanako-chan, having made a promise to a second year student, she couldn't just discard it, or the surrounding people wouldn't remain quiet about it.

"My apologies for the interruption. Do your best in gym." Yumi smiled and began to walk down the hall. In any case, the operation was a success.

Yesterday, when Yumi had watched as Kanako-chan had ridden off on the bus, she had felt really miserable. After that, it hadn't been possible to report everything from the beginning to Onee-sama and her companions. Why she hadn't been able to talk about it, she had been thinking over for a while; it was obviously because she had been timid about confronting Kanako-chan, she had concluded. Because she didn't want it to become any more complicated, she needed to see Kanako-chan's expression.

She didn't recall having done anything bad, but that wasn't a drawback. Once she realized that it would be better to take action, she had come up with this strategy. It was named "Operation I am an upperclassman, you are a under classman." As always, her naming sense was pretty pathetic. It had gone so unexpectedly easy that she felt a little let down.

At any rate, the real match was to come. As expected, Kanako-chan's heart was not opened. She'd have to wait until they talked after school for the rest.

Because she didn't know whether Kanako-chan might be watching, Yumi walked, mindful of the person behind her. When she reached halfway on the stairs and turned a corner, putting her in a blind spot from the first-year Tsubaki classroom, Yumi let her shoulders relax and sighed heavily. Playing the part of a graceful and refined upperclassman was no fun at all.

When her shoulders had dropped and she had returned to herself, Yumi walked back to the second-year Pine Group with small steps.

Part 5.

It was the promised after school.

After cleaning was over, she went once more to the Rose Mansion, where everyone was gathered, to inform them that she had something to do, then she left.

“Have fun.”

“Don’t worry about us, take your time.”

No one asked for a reason. Yumi assumed that they all somehow knew it was something important.

“Yumi,” said Sachiko-sama, as she followed Yumi out of the biscuit door. “This time, I won’t intrude.” Meaning, you’ll be by yourself - good luck.

“Yes.” Yumi nodded. “But, Onee-sama, at that time on Saturday, that you showed up, made me very happy. I never thought it was an intrusion.” In fact it was the exact opposite - she was thankful for having been rescued. At that moment, her onee-sama had appeared miraculously, from behind Kanako-chan, whose pointed words were causing her great pain. It had been about two weeks and she wasn’t sure she was fully recovered.

That she was able to recover so quickly she completely understood was due in large part to Sachiko-sama’s immediate first aid and subsequent care.

“I see.” Sachiko-sama fixed Yumi’s tie, taking the opportunity to gently stroke her cheek, then returned to the room. Yumi turned and went down the stairs. Was it because of onee-sama’s encouragement that her every step down the stairs became more firm and energetic? With that confidence, she left the Rose Mansion, and by the time she arrived at the promised location, she was assured of victory. It was as if she had become Ivan and taken the pony of “The Hunchbacked Pony” as a good luck charm.

There was already someone at the old greenhouse.

“Because Yumi-sama invoked the assistance of the people in the classroom, you must have been serious about reeling me in.” From in front of the Rosa Chinensis plant, a person loitered, turning to voice her complaint first.

“Didn’t you consider running away?” Drawing closer to her slowly, Yumi smiled.

“Yes. However, somehow I was led here. When I saw the reflection of a figure outside from the corner of my eye, it didn’t relax me. You really saved me by being obscure about the place we were meeting.”

Complaints, one. Gratitude, one. Score - one win, one loss.

So, even if there wasn’t anyone else to see, their mutual conversation was coming into existence. Even more than yesterday, this was progress consisting of one step, then two.

“So, you want to talk.”

“I don’t want this to be just once with Kanako-chan.”

“What do you mean?” Kanako-chan’s eyebrows drew tighter.

Yumi continued as if she didn’t care. “I know that we can’t return to the relationship we had before, but I don’t like the idea of going on as we are now.”

“You’re already not the Rosa Chinensis en bouton I admired. You thoroughly destroyed my ideal image. Despite this, even now, you expect us to talk and become friends, yes?”

“No. I don’t want to coerce you into a friendly relationship.”

“Then isn’t this fine? Please don’t care.”

Having been scolded by Sachiko-sama, Kanako-chan still hadn’t internalized that she needed to apologize. Even when Yumi is looking, she can turn her self-hatred outwards, and come to a conclusion that she is not to blame.

Of both of them which felt that they were not wrong. How much would either be willing to compromise - like passing along the train rail for how long, she wondered.

How long will we have to talk, Kanako-chan's turned back said honestly.

Although it wasn't reasonable, Yumi didn't want to sever her connection with Kanako-chan. "Have you stopped following me?"

If the answer was "Yes, I have" then it would be possible to go home, since that was what began this all. If she wanted an opportunity to speak to an underclassman, she would hardly need to coerce the situation.

"This whole situation makes me feel really awful. If you look right at me and you tell me that you hate me, then there's no help for it. This is for Kanako-chan's mental well-being. If that's the case, then I want to hear it clearly from your mouth. I'm sure you understand. What do you say? Are you going to run away by not looking at me?"

"...I don't care. Whatever you want is fine. What I think is worthless anyway."

"Inside Kanako-chan, people can only be classified into two types - people you like and people you find trivial?"

"Two types? That's an oversimplification." Kanako-chan spoke coldly over her shoulder. "Because there is a third type, too - the person one hates enough to want to kill, right?" Three types is less of a sketchy categorization than two, apparently.

"And right now, my status has been downgraded into the trivial person category, right?" Yumi didn't consider that she would be seen by Kanako-chan as a person she hated enough to kill. But by even saying those words, clearly there was someone she felt that she hated enough to kill that existed in this world. But Kanako-chan seemed not at all like a "person who wants to kill."

Kanako-chan's likes and dislikes appeared to be wide and deep. Of the people who were indispensable to her heart, "people I want to kill" might possibly become "people I love."

"Could we possibly become trivial people we like, you and I?"

“Don’t be ridiculous. Is it really okay to put it like that?”

“You’re running away.”

“Running away?”

“Are you really that scared of me?”

At Yumi’s words, Kanako-chan’s expression was distorted, as she repeated the words. “Scared of? Uncomfortable. The Fukuzawa Yumi I admired was abruptly usurped by a different personality that day.”

“Usurped...” This time it was Yumi who repeated what had been said. She was the actual person in question and she didn’t recall anything being usurped. “The real Fukuzawa Yumi has disappeared and been sent to space by an evil twin and is right now rounding Mars.”

“Whah?”

“So I think, since suddenly you want to build a new relationship?”

“Please don’t make jokes.”

“I’m being totally serious.”

From the point in time where Kanako-chan’s imagined image of Fukuzawa Yumi was mistaken, she simply ceased to exist anywhere in this world. Something close to having died. But even if it is a little like that, is it okay to turn it into going out to the stars, she thought. You can’t reach out your hand and reach the stars, even if there is life out there.

“The point is, don’t you want to come and assist with the school festival? The Yamayurikai, the play.”

“Why me?”

“You don’t have club activities after class.”

“I don’t have any obligation. What is this - a penalty game?”

“Yes. Then it’s a penalty. If you lose, you help us.”

“Huh?”

“Um, what should the match be, I wonder... Um, right. Coming up soon is the Sports Festival, isn’t it?”

This would be great, flashed into Yumi's mind. If they could conclude this during the Sports Festival, then there'd be plenty of time for the school festival.

However.

"Which contest do you want to make the target of this bet? We're in different years."

"Ah, true. But there is one event that all years have in common. The "Scavenger Hunt Race."

"Scavenger Hunt Race..." Kanako-chan's mouth just slightly lifted at the corners.

"What?"

"No, nothing. I was just thinking that that was very like you."

A high school Sports Day Scavenger Hunt Race. Saying "It's like you" about this contest isn't much of a compliment. Why then - maybe because it plays an indispensable, but supporting, role.

"And you are?"

"The Color Opposition Relay."

"That's like you."

This time, the words, "that's like you" were definitely meant as a compliment. With such height as Kanako-chan had, her legs were naturally long. Long legs were naturally considerably advantageous in such a thing.

"Which color is going to win, which will lose?" Tsubaki group's Kanako-chan's color is red, Matsu group's Yumi is green.

"My power alone may not be enough to take this."

"So, who would you bet on?"

"If I was going to bet, then I'd bet on Yellow."

"That's no good. Your own team is going to win, getting points little by little and keep going."

"I understand."

Kanako-chan was ready to bet outside her own desire.

“Then? I...in other words, if Red team wins, Yumi-sama has to do something I ask?”

“Eh –”

“I can’t be the only one taking a risk in playing the penalty game, that would be weird. If we’re talking a bet here, then doesn’t there have to be two alternatives holding each other in balance?”

“That would be the most plausible view.” Two beads of sweat ran down Yumi’s temple. She lifted the heel of her hand to wipe them away. Considering the proposal, she thought that there’s no way out of it easily. “Understood. Anything Kanako-chan asks, with some exceptions.”

“Except?”

“Ah, like, giving Sachiko-sama her rosary back or anything that involves a third person. Giving you a million dollars, something I cannot bring myself to do. If you say die, please, you’ll have to forgive me.”

“By all means, everything will be in proportion.”

“The penalty should be in balance with the wish.”

“I’ll think it over then answer. Because of this, I’m actually looking forward to Sports Day.” Smiling boldly, Kanako-chan left the greenhouse.

Left, behind, Yumi said, “What kind of outrageous promise did I just make...?” Any regret she feels now will just have to wait until after the festival.

Part 6.

The following day, Wednesday, noon recess.

Noriko arrived at the Rose Mansion. As soon as she and Yumi had begun to eat their lunches, she turned directly to Yumi and asked a strange question.

“Yumi-sama, what on earth did you do?”

“Heh?” She was so startled by the sudden question that she dropped the tamagoyaki from her chopsticks. Bad, but since it fell on her meal, it was safe.

“What did Yumi-san do? And since then, what happened?” Yoshino-san asked suspiciously, while opening the lid of a bentou box and beginning to eat. Whether she really had any hint or understood what was going on, this time Yumi really thought that she deserved the title of ESPer.

“Um. Yesterday after school, Yumi-san spoke with Kanako-san... Isn’t that right...?” Gradually as she spoke, Noriko’s self-confidence began to lag, so the last few words had the feeling of a fade out.

“I did. What of it?” Yumi inclined her head. Not Yoshino-san so much, what on earth did Noriko want to know?

“So then, that...”

“That?”

They followed Noriko-chan at a lope to the window, where they all looked down upon the same grounds, where mixed in with the various students spread out eating lunch were a group of students practicing baton hand-off. Standing in the center was Kanako-chan.

“She’s taken the initiative in relay practice. Until the day before yesterday, she’s shown an open dislike for the relay, and has blown off the combined three-year Red team practice sessions.”

“Combined practice?”

“Yes. Tōko was very outspoken about it. I’m not complaining, but it’s like she’s become a completely different person this morning. The rumor in class is that it’s because of something Yumi-sama said.”

“Um.” It probably was. In order to gain victory in the contest with Yumi, Kanako-chan has started special training. The points given for the color opposition relay were higher than for individual effort, this had suddenly become advantageous. The scavenger hunt race with Yumi had suddenly become a side contest, since the points allotted to that weren’t very high.

“Whatever it is, isn’t it praiseworthy?”

“Not praiseworthy at all. Yumi-san, if the Red team starts really working hard at this, what do you think will happen? Our Green team will come in last place!” Yoshino-san said, flourishing her chopsticks.

“Why?”

“Because this year the Yellow team is the heavy favorite. The Red and Green teams are competing for last place. Wait, don’t you check the ‘Lillian Kawaraban?’” From her bag, Yoshino-san pulled out the school newspaper, and in front of Yumi’s eyes slapped the pages, slap, slap.

“Even so, if I had seen it what would that do?”

“If you had seen it, you would know who the main members of that team are. That’s the important thing here. Here, look.”

The Yellow team was composed of the members of the first, second and third-year Kiku Group. Scattered within were the names of the long-and short-distance runners club. Also listed were regulars from the softball team, the captain of the volleyball team and several eminent members of the gymnastics team.

In light of this, the fact that Yumi and Yoshino-san were on the Green team and Kanako-chan on the Red team, seemed a little lonely. Of course, there were many other representatives from the athletics clubs, but the numbers were not inconsiderable. At the time the classes were split, some good words must have been said.

So the candidate for last place is practicing. The Red Team is acting properly, looking forward.

“But, the White Team isn’t complete.” Yumi muttered, looking at the data. There were the Green, Red and Yellow team as top three, but no weakest three.

Yoshino-san -san addressed this. “Tch tch tch , Yumi-san, don’t you know about the White Team Jinx?”

“What, jinx?”

“White Team can’t ever be last place.”

“Can’t be last place?”

“Look, White team is Sumomo (Plum) Group and Sakura (Cherry) Group combined team. Because the names are different, it’s pretty weak. But every year they hold out.”

“Um.”

When put like that it’s kind of obvious. All three years in high school are broken into common plant name groups. Except the Sumomo group had only first and third years and Sakura Group took the place for second year.

“Speaking of that... Why is it that only that group has a different name for second-year?”

“Okay, can we not worry about that right now?” More importantly, Yoshino-san clearly wanted to talk about “what Kanako-chan is doing.” Noriko-chan also was leaning forward, her interest piqued.

“I just proposed a contest during the Sports Festival, that’s all. Whether the Red team wins, or Green team wins.”

“Why would you do that?” Noriko-chan blurted out.

Yumi repeated the words. “Why, you ask?”

“Perhaps Noriko-chan thought that Yumi-san had made Hosokawa Kanako-san her sœur?” Shimako-san said from behind them, having been in the room for some time.

“Yes. That Kanako-san was interested in getting the class to work hard, was a command she needed to comply with in order to get an onee-sama.”

“And when you heard that, you thought it resembled Yumi-san?”

“Yumi-sama’s actions yesterday stood out. My classmates and I were really puzzled by them and speculated as to their meaning... That Kanako-chan would be in such high spirits just to beat Green team wasn’t something we considered.”

Well no, these high spirits weren’t “just” for that reason.

“But that’s strange. Isn’t Kanako-chan a Yumi-san devotee? Why would she be so enthusiastic an enemy?”

“Hahaha. You must have misunderstood what you saw.”

“So, what’s left of all that cuteness? What an impudent first-year.” Yoshino-san wrung a nearby curtain, which caused Noriko to say, “I’m sorry.”

There there, Noriko-chan. It’s not necessary for you to apologize for the ineptness of your classmate.

After all, if the contest has created such a great uproar, how much better will the as-yet-unmentioned penalty game be?

“It’s okay Yumi-san, right? There’s no way we’re going to lose to the Red team.” Ignoring the only person here on the Red team (Noriko-chan) Yoshino-san grasps her hands and squeezes. “Now that we know, The Green team too, from tomorrow on, will gather for special training at the appeal of a leader.”

Uh, Earth to Yoshino-san. Just as Yumi went to call out to her, both the Yellow and Red Rosa entered the room.

“Ah, you’re full of vigor today, aren’t you, Yoshino-san? The Sports Festival is going to be interesting, isn’t it?” Rei looked very happy that her sœur seemed so energetic.

“You go over there, Onee-sama. The Yellow team is the enemy!” Like you would to drive away a cat, Yoshino-san shooed her away with light hand motions. “Ah, since Sachiko-sama is an ally, she’s welcome to come over here. Let’s work hard for the Sports Festival, shall we?”

“Eh? Yes.” Pressed by Yoshino-san’s intensity, Sachiko-sama nodded vaguely.

Thinking about it, both the Yellow Rose Family and White Rose Family were on different teams and would be fighting against themselves.

Second Year Fuji (Apple) Group Shimako-san was on the Purple Team, whereas first-year Tsubaki (Camellia) Group Noriko-chan was Red Team.

Third-year Kiku (Chrysanthemum) Group Rei-sama was on the Yellow Team, second-year Matsu (Pine) Group Yoshino-san was on the Green Team.

Alone of all of them, the Red Rose Family would not be separated. For one day, the members of the Yamayurikai, older and younger sisters, would be set to fight against each other, a very hard thing.

“Yoshinoooo--.”

As Rei-sama’s miserable voice reached her ear, Yumi was very happy that she was on the same team as Onee-sama.

Everything Prepared?

Part 1.

Maria-sama's Heart Wraps Around Us Like The Wide Sky

When the rain is falling and it suddenly clears up, one is likely to say, "Oh look, it's back to normal" and "Because Maria-sama is on our side." Especially at a Catholic girls' school.

So saying, about this and that, and various things, the day of the Lillian Jogakuen Sports Festival turned out clear.

"Gym clothes – check. Lunch – check. Then, "I'm off!" Counting things off on her fingers in the hallway, she made to leave. The final "I'm off!" was heard.

"Ah, Yumi-chan." She was called to stop.

"What? If it's about the invitations, I gave them to mother yesterday." She answered, though she was half outside.

"This ought to be okay, shouldn't it?" Wearing a cream polo shirt, looking down with some trepidation upon his daughter was her father. As he hesitated, he held several outfits of clothes in his hand.

"Isn't that okay? What's up?"

"What's up? Well, just look – I have to choose which one is all right."

She looked past the usual outfits to the sleeves of the new ones. These were the ones left over as candidates from how many? Ah, after a good look, she could see that mixed in was one of Yūki's shirts.

"Yeah, look, today is your daughter's Sports Festival – is it really necessary to do father's fashion show?"

Today is Sunday.

Luckily, Dad didn't have to go into work today, so he could come and watch Sports Day. But, that having been said, he was a little over-excited.

"But, what if I look bad compared with the other fathers... If I look spectacularly out of place won't that cause Yumi-chan some embarrassment? Not only that, but isn't my daughter Rosa Chinensis nth's little sister?"

“It’s Chinensis.” Dad was probably confusing it with Hyacinth. Since they were both pretty flowers, he probably didn’t differentiate between types.

“Yumi-chan, please.” He didn’t seem to understand that he was over-thinking this. Clearly it was up to the daughter to choose such things to his satisfaction. A little puzzled, Yumi made her decision.

“Then, one of the polo shirts in your left hand. Green is a good color for you, and since I’m on the green team, it’ll be a lucky color, probably.” Really, she didn’t care if he just wore the cream colored shirt he was wearing, but she thought it would feel more like she had considered the decision this way. If she expressed her reasons, it would seem like she understood his feelings properly.

“Mm. Okay. But, is it all right not to wear a suit?” In his right hand he held up charcoal gray suit which would be a best choice for a class inspection.

“Oyaji. Sports Day is like an athletic meet, got it? So isn’t a rough appearance your best bet?” Yūki came in, yawning hugely, and lifted the suit out of his father’s hand. Then he pulled out his own property.

“Father has a secret rivalry burning in his heart against Sachiko-sama’s father, huh~” Hearing all the noise from the foyer, Mom had come out to participate.

“But, you know, Sachiko-sama’s family isn’t coming.” Her mother, who on the verge of Yumi’s invitation to the Ogasawara family summer home panicked and sent a package of Koshihikari rice , seemed today to be strangely relaxed; she had known this beforehand. “I’m sorry, I forgot to tell you.” Her mother laughed calmly. Yumi followed.

“A relative’s wedding.”

“It’s Sunday, after all.”

In one instant the tension dropped. Dad turned his back, his arms full of the clothes he was returning to his closet, step, step back down the hallway. Yumi continued by calling out to her younger brother. “What about you, Yūki? Are you coming?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean, ‘why?’ I have plans to go out.” Her younger brother snapped, as he exited.

“...So you say, but it’ll be a real embarrassment. Hey, since I made food made for your lunch, at least come and eat at lunchtime.”

From within came his answer of “Mm.” If he’s speaking of eating lunch together, then maybe going out is not getting from his mouth to being done.

When Yumi sees her mother smile and nod, she feels admiration. She’s exceptionally good at understanding her husband’s and son’s actions.

“However...” Sports Day at a girl’s school is a bit embarrassing, right.

“A boy of this age has a delicate mentality... Yumi-chan might not understand.”

“Uh-” She can read her daughter’s mind. Don’t make light of Moms.

“It’s good that you’re enthusiastic, but don’t go getting hurt. Following your second match, come right home.”

“Even though you say that, isn’t that more like for a class trip?”

“Technically.” Smiling, Mom sent her out. “Go. Dad will follow afterwards to watch.”

“Um, I’m off.” With a cheerful response, Yumi left the front hall. As she exited, she took a deep breath of the blue sky. Following the second match. But what if the one before it means waiting for a penalty game? It’s not something that can be spoken of leisurely.

Part 2.

As soon as she arrived at the school, she could see the first-year Tsubaki Group, but Kanako-chan's figure was not visible.

"Her bags are here." Noriko-chan looked around the classroom.

"If you're wearing your uniform, change into your gym clothes... Don't we have somewhere to do relay practice."

"Morning training, huh?"

What extraordinary energy, even though the Sports Festival had already begun, no one had heard of the content of the penalty game, even a bit.

"When Kanako-chan comes back, should we send her along to Yumi-sama's classroom? What should we say?"

"Okay, okay, you don't have time for this, the Sports Festival has begun. All of you go meet up on the grounds." Yumi fluttered her hand, stepping back. A little out of it, she started to leave, then sort of haphazardly said, "See you" to Noriko, as she turned her back.

"Ah, Yumi-sama?" Noriko enquired mysteriously, but did not follow her. Instead, a different person came flying out of the room after her.

"Yumi-sama." At the same time her name was called, her arm was grabbed, so Yumi turned to look over her shoulder. There, already wearing her gym clothes, stood a single young woman.

"Tōko-chan?" Tōko-chan was gazing at Yumi with an unusually, for her, serious expression. Something to say –

"What promise did you make with Hosokawa Kanako?" Tōko-chan said as they reached the empty stairwell entrance. "Noriko-chan just chalked it up to a case of simple competitiveness with the Green team when she explained it to our classmates, but..." She moved a little closer, then continued. "But I don't think that's only it."

From the school grounds, where classes were doing warm-up exercises quickly, "One, two three four" could be heard. Yumi stretched out both hands to hold the handrail. From here, she could see the Rose Mansion.

“That’s not enough to move her.” Waiting for “Five, six, seven, eight,” Tōko-chan muttered. “Yumi-sama would not have called Hosokawa Kanako just to say something like ‘Let’s both do our best.’”

“You understand well.” Yumi opened her mouth at last. As she expected, the subject of Tōko-chan’s discussion was Kanako-chan.

“What are you up to, Yumi-sama?”

“Up to?” As Yumi repeated the words, the corner of her lips lifted slightly, giving the appearance that she had guessed correctly. “I don’t know that I’m up to anything – I think it’s wonderful that she’s so Rah-Rah and gung ho.” Yumi said.

“Y..you think it’s good!?” Tōko-chan’s trademark coiled hair rolls flounced up, looking for a moment like the wings of a wild duck as her eyebrows rose.

“Isn’t it? Kanako-chan has managed to bring to birth a feeling in her class of all wanting to stand as one. Don’t you think of that as a plus, Tōko-chan?” There was no way Tōko-chan, who didn’t want to be compliant with Kanako-chan, wouldn’t take offense at this.

“You don’t really understand this. At first glance it might appear to be good, but really, in the end, it’s a minus. Right, Yumi-sama? If Hosokawa Kanako had spontaneously decided to do this, then I wouldn’t have any complaints. But if it’s a result of a condition by Yumi-sama’s, then - -”

Then you would complain, huh, Tōko-chan. Pretty good reasoning there.

“It’s not something to smile about.”

“Ah, sorry.” With this girl standing in front of her, protesting so seriously, she was somehow loveable, as if she were an onee-sama with whom she could speak frankly or say things inadvertently.

“Let’s just say that which team wins and what promise I made with Kanako-chan intersect.”

“Ehh!?”

“So that’s why Kanako-chan is so enthusiastic.”

“- -”

Hearing this verbal surprise attack left Tōko-chan speechless. Yumi took the opportunity to confess the actual contents.

“If Kanako-chan is on the losing side, she has to assist the Yamayurikai with the play.”

“A...and the opposite?”

“I haven’t been told.”

“You’re really an idiot, aren’t you?” As always, the girl spoke in an unacceptable fashion to a sempai. “She’s going to ask you to make her your sœur.”

“I don’t think she will.” Yumi remembered a former conversation she had heard at the newspaper club, where Kanako had refused the suggestion that she wanted to be sœur outright. True, that was before they had quarreled. Their relationship had become more complicated, but still, she thought that particular line was lost.

“You don’t have any guarantee of that.”

“That’s true, but.”

“People’s feelings do change.”

“You are correct.”

However, it was clear that Yumi really didn’t feel as if that would be Kanako-chan’s request. But, what if she did ask to be made sœur, please - -

If she did ask, then she’d think about what she would do. If she doesn’t ask, then there’s no point in spending time worrying. If she has that kind of free time, she should spend it doing leg stretches so that her Scavenger Hunt Race wasn’t the most ungainly.

“Yumi-sama, why are you so lenient with Hosokawa Kanako?” Tōko-chan asked with a sigh.

“Lenient?”

“But, hasn’t Hosokawa Kanako done terrible things to you?”

“Why do you say that?”

If that situation arises, it was between Yumi and Kanako-chan and Sachiko-sama alone. Which of them was more likely to exclude others from their togetherness, she didn’t think about.

“It’s not like I asked someone. It’s just something I have a feeling about.”

“Is that it?”

Gooood observation. She wonders if it’s the most sensible way to understand this situation. Because Tōko-chan especially sees Kanako-chan her natural enemy, it makes sense that she’d be on her mind all the time. It’s like a test in math or chemistry or physics, where not everyone has the proper formula for solving the test, they might try to answer it with some vague statement like “But I have a feeling about it,” as a reason, while burying their face in the test paper with the title written in the National Language.

“She’s very dependent. She puts out an environment of despair. She has no self-confidence. I pity her. There are people rolling around in the world like that. When I see her sulking, I feel pointlessly irritated.” Tōko spat out. Seemed like “people like that” really stood for “pathetic people.”

“Everyone has feelings like that. And we’re all wounded at some time. Different people are damaged differently.”

“But judge this objectively. Between a scratch and a bone fracture, which one hurts worse?”

Obviously a scratch was a typical injury. But Kanako-chan’s wounds couldn’t be judged from the outside to be mere scratches.

“Right. Tōko-chan would know of Kanako-chan’s circumstances.”

“Yeah. That is, I’ve heard things from people. You don’t know what happened, do you, Yumi-sama? That girl, her father—”

“Stop it, Tōko-chan.” Yumi put a stop to it. “I have no intention of listening to this.



“...Yumi-sama” Tōko-chan looked momentarily surprised, looking at Yumi’s face as she stood next to her. Apparently she thought that she’d want to unconditionally hear it.

“If Kanako-chan wants to tell me firsthand, I’ll listen. But, right now, there’s no need for me to listen to you tell me.” While talking to Tōko-chan, Yumi felt her own feelings settle. “Whatever happened to Kanako-chan has nothing to do with our bet. Tōko-chan, you might possibly be worried at what damage I’ll take if I lose, but today’s Sports Festival is not about victory or defeat.”

“What the heck is that?” Tōko-chan’s eyebrows drew together. At any rate, it looked like this was the first time her ears had ever heard such a thing.

“Kanako-chan might take the victory. More than that, what is it worth even thinking about?”

“I have no idea what you mean.” After expending a great deal of energy on trying to grasp the meaning of Yumi’s words, Tōko-chan seemed to give up.

So, Yumi gave Tōko-chan a special lesson. “This is about the relationship between Kanako-chan and I. About the contest, and the bet, I was able to have a conversation with Kanako-chan. That was the point.”

When she finished hearing that, Tōko looked down and muttered, “I hope it all goes well.”

“Eh?”

“Really, it all seems too happy ever after, Yumi-sama.” Tōko-chan lifted her face and looked at Yumi challengingly. “If that happens and Hosokawa Kanako becomes more and more impudent, don’t wonder why. I really dislike when you’re so easygoing. Really, you should be thinking about becoming a suitable Rosa Chinensis en bouton.”

“Eh-”

Having decided that any further conversation with Yumi was hopeless, Tōko-chan turned her back and reached up to the entrance door. At the moment it opened, “Ah, right, right.” As if she had forgotten something, she turned and spoke over her shoulder. “There’s one correction. So there’s no misunderstanding, I’m not worried about Yumi-sama at all.”

“Ah... Yeah?”

“Yes. Then, excuse me. Yumi-sama, before you go on with this thing with your usual absent-mindedness, don’t you think it would be best if you hurried to your classroom? You can’t participate in the sports festival in your school uniform.” Leaving behind a bold smile, the banana curls disappeared into the school building.

“Go on this thing with my usual absent-mindedness...?” As she turned towards her classroom she stopped as if called. “This thing” she wondered what person or place it was. Well, if she had any complaints, the person she needed to address was already gone from here.

“That Tōko-chan.” Nevertheless, Yumi was very self-conscious of laughing at herself. As much as she wanted to say things, was it just too unpleasant to say them.

“Hates it when I’m too easy-going, huh?” Asking herself that, Yumi sped up her steps and hurried to the second-year Pine Group classroom.

Part 3.

Just as always, after the Morning Prayer broadcast, homeroom was carried out.

“Although the tendency is to be enthusiastic, don’t go and get carried away. Previously, a sempai was hurt badly enough that she couldn’t go on the class trip.” The homeroom teacher warned; the first half of which was similar to a mother, the second half of which sounded a lot like a threat. An injury severe enough to keep someone from going on the class trip, what could that be. A broken bone or a full-body bruise – the students in the classroom fell silent momentarily. It might seem awfully painful, but not being able to go on the class trip seemed even more painful, they thought. Of the three years spent in high school, the class trip was one of the top five best events one could participate in. The school festival or sports day, if you missed it, it would come around again, but to miss the class trip would be something you might regret forever.

“Although I say this every year, it’s never effective for the second-years.” Looking happy, the teacher smiled.

A voice criticized, “That’s totally a lie, isn’t it?”

“It’s not a lie – it happened once about ten years ago.” Stiffening in offense, the teacher curtly brought the conversation to a close.

“Go ahead, Yumi-san.” Yumi and her neighbor had bags in front of them. They walked around with, while everyone took object like watches and purses from the person in front of them and passed them to the person behind to be put in the bag. As usual, Yoshino-san and Mami-san stood at the chalkboard.

“That’s fine. These will go to the person in charge of valuables. Let’s gather at 9:50, please. Where is Green team going to be?” Yoshino-san called out, while Mami-san compulsively made a cupped ear pose.

“The space next to the library.” Like children, everyone answered cheerfully.

“That’s it. Everyone assigned to work, please take your spots. Then, last, let’s pray for a good fight.” Declaring this powerfully, Yoshino-san left the classroom with spirit. She headed for the main gate to support visitor check-in. Because this is a girl’s high school, check-in is especially strict to make sure that people who were not involved did not get in. This was also true for the culture festival and graduation ceremony, but for the sports festival it was the strictest. Lillian’s Sports Festival didn’t get much exposure but still, it wasn’t something they wanted exposed to public notice, since it seemed like there’s be an awful lot of people who would think, “I want to see that.” Tickets bore the full name of each student and were checked against a list of graduates. It was very serious.

When her classmates dispersed, Yumi stood up from her seat.

Tsutako-san -san inquired, “Hey, Yumi-san, do you have a job?”

“Yeah, I’m helping transport goods from the gymnasium.”

“Ah, the costumes for the **Pep Squad**, huh...”

Tsutako-san disconnected from the classroom where she had been assigned work. Mostly odd jobs, after which, her classmates wanted her to take pictures - not just of them, but of their onee-sama, and the Rosas dancing - she had been given many requests like that. You know, like pictures of love at first sight in the place where the third-year-certain-group Pep Squad changed.

As it happens, Yumi knew that Sachiko-sama was a member of the Pep Squad. So when she has said, “But I wish, a little, that we were doing it together” she had been ordered to carry the uniforms to where they were. It wasn’t just an example of flexibility in role-sharing, it had the feel of being skillfully managed. But if it put her at the side of Sachiko-sama, then it was all good.

“Tsustako-san, take a really good photo. Make sure I get a print.”

When Yumi made this request, she did it somewhat in the style of Tōko-chan, as a spoiled child.

“As long as Sachiko-sama says it’s all right.” Tsutako-san answered coolly. She had no problem taking peeping tom pictures, but she had a principle of never publishing them unless she got permission from the subject themselves. Shaking her head, if a picture was refused, she would firm her spine and burn the negatives.

But, even if she did not say so, this seemed to be a prospect. There was no one other than Sachiko-sama that Yumi wanted as a photographic subject.

“What if Sachiko-sama says no?”

“She won’t say that. Most importantly, I want a picture of the two of you together. To make up for the lack at last year’s athletic festival.”

“Together, huh?”

To have one speck of the world, one moment to aim at, where the two of them stood side by side, in the same green headbands... She pondered.

“To avoid her saying so, or our wild idea being put off, let’s hurry to the gymnasium. Or she might scold you with ‘You’re late, Yumi.’”

“Right.” At such an accurate impression, Yumi instinctively saluted carefully.

“Hey, hey, I’m not Sachiko-sama, you know.” Tsutako-san seemed dazed, but lifted her camera and pressed the shutter, as expected.

At the gymnasium Green team space, Sachiko-sama was already there, but she did not say, “You’re late, Yumi.”

“Ah, Yumi. You can, bring the drum and sticks over there to the Pep Squad seats.”

“Yes sir.”

This was the first time they had seen each other today and she didn’t even get a “Good day” just jumped right into the main subject. It was a trifling thing to be sure, but Yumi couldn’t help but think “our relationship is growing more natural.” They were still far short of Yoshino-san and Rei’s mature couple position. But even so, it made her happy. A year ago, she would not have even thought that this would be possible to see, it would have been a dream.

---And. Looking back over her shoulder at them from the Red team space was Tōko-chan. When Tōko-chan had turned her face towards Yumi at the same time she had seen Tōko-chan, for some reason Tōko had begun to work. She moved this thing there and that thing here and somehow moved the thing back to its original space - movements with no significance at all.

Absent-minded Tōko-chan. Had her beloved Sachiko-sama seen it, she had to wonder?

“We’re sorry we’re late. Third-year and second-year onee-samas, for today, please take care of us.” Arriving late, the first-year Matsu Group carriers bowed three times.

“That’s fine. Because this is the first-year student’s first sports festival, your homeroom teacher has many detailed warnings to offer, correct?” Next to Sachiko-sama, checking on the clothing, the chief of the Pep Squad said with a smile. Of course, once she had probably been in that lower class homeroom. But Yumi wondered if she wasn’t also being scolded.

“Excuse me, Yumi-sama. What should we...?” Carrying the drums out of the gymnasium, the first-years asked hesitatingly. The chief of the squad should be issuing orders, but she was in negotiations with the chief of the neighboring Pink team, while the vice-chief, Sachiko-sama, was just leaving with the uniforms.

“Is it all right if we take these to the pep squad seats?”

“Ah - The banners, right. Because they’ll be used for the opening ceremony parade, don’t take them. The same goes for the placard. This cardboard box is supposed to be used in the afternoon; I think that’s the plan.” After saying all that, nothing was left. However, naturally, they had come to help, but all that was left was house-sitting.

“Understood. So we’ll just take the drums and sticks.” The miniature versions of traditional Japanese drums were handed over and sent out.

“You should go wherever Rosa Chinensis is and confirm where they should be placed.”

“Right. Thank you very much.” With happy smiles because they’d been given work, the two first-years left the gymnasium.

Yumi lifted a hand and waved at them, also smiling. From behind a voice whispered, subdued, “Rosa Chinensis en bouton, you’ve become quite reliable, haven’t you?”

With a jolt, Yumi looked back over her shoulder to find the chief of the Pep Squad standing there with arms crossed, nodding.

“Sachiko-san also feels good about that, I bet.”

“Eh -” Yumi immediately smoothed her panicked exclamation over with a quick, “Excuse me.” As usual, her graceless expression had spoiled the compliment. “I’m a bit disconcerted.” But, as she remembered that morning’s comment, “become suitable for” she shot a glance over to the Red team space, but she did not see Tōko-chan in her former spot.

(...Why) Whatever she had hoped for, went flat just a little.

The two first-years and Sachiko-sama returned together to the gymnasium. Perfect timing, since the Green team students were just heading towards the meeting space next to the library.

Since she hadn’t carried anything earlier, she picked up the green banners and clackety-clack followed after Sachiko-sama. It was a little like carrying the swords of the champion into the arena. As always, Sachiko-sama went forward proudly.

After she had handed the flags over to the squad leader who stood with the third-years who had previously entered the area, Yumi turned towards the line of second-years when Sachiko-sama called “Yumi,” and halted her.

“Yes?”

Looking back, Yumi’s eyes flew to a Sachiko-sama who stood there with a victorious expression and one finger raised.

“A low level duel is a foolish thing, right? If you are going to do this, then your aim should be victory, not just the Red team.”

Haughty, high-handed, and dazzlingly beautiful. As expected, Sachiko-sama was magnificent. At being commanded so, Yumi felt a thrill of electricity suddenly run through her body.

“Yes!”

Sachiko-sama looked satisfied with such an energetic response. “That’s what I expect from my sœur. Let’s do our best.”

As she lined up with the rest of the second-years, Yumi thought, “Nevertheless.” She hadn’t been energized at all at that time Yoshino-san spoke with such fire. Today, on the actual day of the match, her fire had been ignited.

As the time to gather grew close, Yoshino-san and Mami-san arrive and second-year Matsu Group assembled.

“How was visitor reception?”

“A booming business. No really, as predicted, everyone’s parents kept coming and coming. Everyone came to view their daughters’ gala occasion. My parents practically leapt forward to hand over their ticket. It was so embarrassing, everyone pretended to look elsewhere, but Rei-chan’s father probably saw.”

Until she had had heart surgery, Yoshino-san hadn’t been able to participate in athletic meets or the Sports Festival. This would be the first year she participated in anything other than the opening parade and the dance, so her parents were probably delighted. Even better, she was in the standout event, the team relay.

“I’m sure that my parents are here.” Yumi said, as if speaking to herself, but Yoshino-san responded, “Yes,” with all her heart.

“No way. How do you know?”

“Because. All the tickets have the names of students written on them. Even if that had not been so, I think I would have thought so... Yumi-san, you could say both Fukuzawa siblings, look like your father.”

“Huh.”

“He’s wearing a green polo shirt, isn’t he?”

Ugh. She knew that already, but coming as it did randomly from Yoshino-san’s mouth. “That’s kind of embarrassing.” Somewhere where she wasn’t, her parents were meeting her good friends. A creeping feeling moved up her back.

“It’s all right. I greeted them in ‘honor student mode’.”

“Honor student mode, you say.”

Listening to the two’s conversation silently, Mami-san suddenly opened her mouth.

“I wonder if the former Rosas are coming.”

“Mmm.”

“Torii Eriko-sama and Mizuno Yōko-sama have come to pay a visit to Lillian University’s Satō Sei-sama. Didn’t the two of you hear about it?”

Kaboom, kaboom, Yumi and Yoshino-san both nodded hugely.

Although they were the younger sisters of Rei-sama and Sachiko-sama, they didn’t get much information about the former Rosas from them. Rei-sama hadn’t mentioned even now that tickets had been sent to them.

“Is that right... But, they could arrive after the games start. Even so, eyes will shine in the visitor’s seats.”

Because reception had been closed when Yoshino-san and the others returned, that seemed unlikely.

“The peak is over, we can leave the rest to the teachers.”

“Teachers?”

“The lecturers, and the middle school teachers. Anyone not directly touched by the Sports Festival, as far as they can. After all, after the entrance procession, the students can’t leave.”

As Yoshino-san’s words corroborated this, from wherever, the rest of the students gathered, shuffling up. In the first aid tent, the health squad was on alert, as was the scorer. Also not in the entrance procession were the broadcasting team members.

Nine o'clock in the morning.

Bang bang, the sound of shots reverberated in the air.

"Will every team please get ready for the entrance procession at this time." The sound of the mic brought a little thrill of excitement to the students standing in line.

"White team, please enter."

Yumi's second-year Sports Festival had finally started.

Friend's Affection and Onee-sama

Part 1.

White, purple, yellow, pink, green, red.

One after another the flags were followed by young women wearing the same color headbands around the track, to stand in lines in the interior.

The principal declared the games open. Team captains made the pledge. And then, radio calisthenics - -.

Within the confines of the sports festival, once begun, the events were non-stop. Participants became lost in the moment, as they did things with no time for concerns over emotions or physical health.

To put the sense of pleasure numerically, out of ten, about seven or eight could not even digest a sense of accomplishment at all.

Outside the track, near the curb by the family members was a banner of thanks for the full house. Not as quite densely packed, one could see the teachers, and about half that space was filled with sponsors talking, and even so, was filled with family standing and watching.

Just before exiting, Yumi turned her glance towards the family seats for one last inspection. Seats only in name, really it was a vinyl sheet with bleachers, among which she spied the Fukuzawa pair. Catching her eye, with camera on standby, her father waved at her happily. Yumi turned away quickly.

Why is it that parents you see all the time at home were embarrassing to meet at school? Hurrying to the Green team area, that puzzle was quickly put aside.

The area for the pep squads were also outside the track in a direct line. Colored rope divided the space which rose in a gentle incline, on a nylon sheet, members from each team, regardless of year, mingled. Behind them stood large signboards, emphasizing the team's color. Each team had megaphones and fans matching the signboard in order cheer them on. Where there was a color that didn't match, paper had been affixed on top to make it match.

Now then.

The first event was the first year's ball rolling. This was called "Giant Ball Rolling" and it was a little different from the normal ball. The track was divided into three parts and had ping pong balls, tennis balls and basketballs on it. After once around, the giant ball was on standby. From then on, the giant ball has to be pushed around the ping pong balls, tennis balls and basketballs - in other words, it was a relay.

Last year Yumi and her team had, during this event, found going around with the ping pong balls the most difficult. The name of the game was "rolling" but really, spinning the ball on the ground to progress was the rule. You could use your feet to help, one or two, maybe three people trying to roll the ball, you could use a soccer dribble. Therefore, it was called it "Kickball".

There were four kinds of balls, six round goals. Based on the order of their arrival, 20 points to 5 points would be awarded.

"On your marks, ready...!"

At the sound of the pistol shot, the first round started.

The balls were painted with the team color, from the cheering section they couldn't be seen at all. But the colors of the headbands and sashes could be seen and that brought on shouts of encouragement.

The ping pong balls were so light, they were kicked further ahead of the kickers than they expected. Halfway they were losing sight of their balls and unexpectedly kicking others, which contributed to the occurrences of accidents, which made the ping-pong race interesting.

Thinking that her assistance was not needed for cheering on the Green team, Yumi's gaze went ahead to the Red team.

Noriko-chan, Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan--. All her first-year friends were gathered in the Tsubaki Group, which was why her eye was drawn there.

She squeezed her sweaty hands together on the fourth lap. Tōko-chan was on the ping-pong balls, Noriko-chan on tennis balls and Kanako-chan was standing by in front of the basketball.

The points were Yellow in first place, second place was Pink, third place was Purple, fourth Red, fifth Green. White, the last place team, until halfway was in the race for first, then had the promised derailment when they got lost inside the family area and had to go around looking.

The third lap was finished at a run and Tōko-chan took the sash easily, the fourth lap had begun.

Carefully, carefully, using the inside arch of her sneakers, Tōko rolled the ping-pong balls. Rolly, rolly, rollroll, roll. Tipping it up in the air with the tiptoes, as if it was serious work. Kick, rollrollrollroll, kick! Rollrollroll!

When she had established a good tempo, her glance went to those who chased her.

“Go for it - !”

While Yumi was cheering, she wasn’t sure which person she was cheering for, she thought. The Green team first-years, or Red team’s Tōko-chan.

Don’t go there. If there was even a 10,000 to 1 chance of the latter, the Green team would, as one, turn on her as an enemy.

“Hey, Tōko-chan is really moving forward with some oomph, isn’t she?” Yoshino-san asked calmly. Yumi certainly thought so. This was clearly an unexpected byproduct of the sports festival.

In the end, Green left her behind and Tōko-chan passed the sash to Noriko-chan. To dispel any reluctance of her friend, Noriko-chan gave the tennis ball a good kick.

“Oh...!”

Accurate and with all her heart. She would run to exactly where the ball was then give another good kick.

“Noriko-chan’s doing it.”

With each big kick the ball would go far, which naturally increased the risk. If the ball got too much in front of the player, it could roll off the track and there would be time lost, which although it wasn't the intention, might not be able to be recovered from.

However, Noriko-chan. Not caring kicked with force. Her control was perfect. Overtaking the Green team ahead, so she switched strategy to a smaller kick as the distance closed.

There was nowhere to go.

No matter how you calculated in your head, there was no way to outrun her. Distance, or ration or time or angle or friction... No matter how you figured it, using math or physics formulas, it looked like she just flew past.

In conclusion, the Green team was chasing Noriko-chan, and a dead hit arc meant that Kanako-chan took the sash with a one minute lead.

Kanako-chan took it and skipped, skipped. She had no control, constantly overshot the course and had to adjust, but her speed didn't slacken.

"Wah-" came the shouts from various places.

As if there was no one in front of her, flying and rolling, the conspicuously tall young woman.

The cheers for the leading Purple team were now overwhelmed by the Red team and then, in a moment stopped, as the lead was taken.

One, then in succession, the second and third, sashes were handed over. In other words, by herself Kanako-chan had taken the team from fourth place to the top.

"...Wow." From among the dumbfounded Green team cheering section, Mami-san approached and whispered. "Red team's secret weapon. Yumi-san, really what's up with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Not taking her as a sœur."

“--- It's not like that.”

It's not that she wasn't. She wished that people would stop saying that. But, what if Red team did defeat Green team on points and Kanako-chan asked, “Please make me your sœur.” what would she do? Yumi didn't know herself.

Heading to the bleachers to brood, Sachiko-sama's voice came from above her head. “Yumi. There's no time for idle talk, or lollygagging. Next is the second-years' turn.”

“Ah, yes.”

Standing and looking back over her shoulder, there wrapped in the uniform of the Pep Squad was the figure of her Onee-sama.

“Whaah!”

“Whaah?” Sachiko-sama drew her eyebrows together dubiously, trying to understand the meaning of Yumi's shout.

“Onee-sama, how dashing...!”

“Really?” Sachiko-sama raised a hand lightly and did a “model” turn around. She wore a facial expression that was not dissatisfied.

Made from the same color cloth as the Lillian school uniforms, white gloves and a green headband, which was considerably longer than the normal ones, and a sash of the same color was all good. There were five third-years all dressed the same but, it suited none of them as well as Sachiko-sama. Of course, that was “foolish little sister” talk, Yumi conceded... But please allow it to be said.

“When it first was decided, I wasn't particularly eager. But, after I saw Yumi at the Hanadera School Festival I didn't think **gakuran** was so bad, somehow.”

“Yes, it suits you well. Rosa Chinensis. The onee-sama of the Pep Squad are all in line with our expectations, we second-years will give it our very best.” Mami-san saluted. She took Yumi by the scruff of the neck and pulled her along to the entrance gate.



“You probably have great reluctance to part but, as soon as ‘Dodgeball’ is completed, you will once again be able to meet your beloved onee-sama.”

“Then the next thing is the third years’ ‘Ball Throwing’, I guess.”

Because the three years do their events in turn, even though different years may be on the same team, it was hard to have a relaxed conversation. To make things worse, Sachiko-sama was one of the Pep Squad and had to be on standby at the front of the Green team area.

“...What a splendid relationship you have.” Geez, Mami-san was seriously amazed.

By the way, “Kickball,” “Dodgeball,” and “Ball Throwing” were what the first three events were called casually by every year.

In front of the large written banner at the entrance, the second-year students were gathering from each team.

“You’re late.” Yoshino-san, who had arrived already, looked at her angrily. She might have been slow, but the first-years hadn’t left yet so, even if she was angry, she couldn’t be really late--.

Nodding slightly, Tsutako-san approached and whispered, “The Princess is not amused.” “What’s the reason?”

“Looks like all sorts of things.”

“All sorts, huh?” Yumi glanced quickly over at the scoreboard.

The result of the Ball Rolling was that Green team had fallen two places to fifth. But, after Kanako-chan, their rival Red team had been dragged down slightly to fourth place at the end, by a misplaced goal.

“Have you seen Rei-chan at all?” Yoshino-san suddenly asked, subdued.

“Huh? No, not yet.” Although Mami-san had dragged Yumi through the rear of the Yellow team section, Yumi hadn’t had time to sightsee.

“What’s up with that, already?”

That could be said about you, Yumi thought.

She really didn't know why, but Yoshino-san was really irritated about Rei-sama, but she really didn't have the stomach for directly questioning her about it, since she seemed to get angry at the drop of a hat. Like, for instance, about classmates that gathered a little slowly, that sort of thing.

"Sachiko-sama? You've seen her already."

"Mm." Yumi nodded. Maybe she should mention her gakuran look.

"Yumi's Sachiko-sama is very cool. My Rei-chan if she comes, if Rei-chan comes, if Rei-chan comes..."

It was like a skipping record, wasn't it? Because it seemed to endlessly repeat.

"What will she be wearing?" Yumi saw that Yoshino-san needed a bit of help getting the boat out of dock. So she gave it.

"Canary Festival, sort of like a Carnivale."

"Ca...canary?" ...So you're saying, the familiar little bird that's good at singing, that canary, Yumi decided. Rei-sama's team color is yellow. But getting together in a canary carnival, she really just didn't understand.

As she had said that, Yoshino-san had been looking back and forth around the Yellow team section.

"Don't see it."

"Eh?"

"Have some warrior's compassion. Lady Yumi, if you're in front of me, I can't see."

Yeah, but even if you say that, that won't help you see. A warrior's, no, friend's, affection can be too much and when she acts this way, Yoshino-san is a bit scary.

"Okay, Yumi-san, Yoshino-san."

In front of them is a large bag. Inside was filled with tennis balls made from soft sponge in the team colors, and a cloth with which to grasp the balls. The four turn.

Yoshino-san also grabbed it. Mami-san and Tsutako-san -san already had taken balls. The majority of the balls were cast away in the near vicinity.

Then, for “Dodgeball” who, exactly, was running away?

For each class, there were people with three skills. Someone tall, fast, quick witted would hold the white feathered arrow. That person’s job was to have the basket on their back and run away from the balls.

Yumi and the other’s job was to get the balls in the baskets of the opposing teams without chasing them. In the end the basket with the fewest balls got the most points. The first-years who had done “Ball Rolling” were leaving, and the second-years who would do Dodgeball were ready to enter. This event used the space inside the track. First of all, each team settled into shape where the three team members protected the one who carried the basket on their back.

“Okay? We’re going to attack the red team.” Yoshino-san instructed her nearby teammates.

“Anyway, we have to attack that team with oomph. We’re below them in points.” Just like the warrior of a little while ago, Yoshino-san seemed possessed of the spirit of an ancient strategist.

“Right.”

“Got it.”

Why was it that, even though she saw all her classmates nod, that right from the beginning, she was pretty certain that no one really understood what the strategy was.

The six teams mixed messily. Where each basket was wasn’t easy to see, and once it began, everyone would be going here and there with no idea of where the target was. She had already experienced this in rehearsal.

“It’s starting.”

The sound of the pistol roared on high. At that signal, colored balls began flying from all directions. The balls were light, so they never flew as far as one hoped. Therefore the idea of an attack on the enemy was effectively thrown away until you got close to a basket.

To seriously consider protecting one’s own basket, your allies have to surround it and block the oncoming balls. That lowered the probability of balls going into the basket. But, if one is protecting, then one can’t attack. To attack, one couldn’t protect. That was the trifling dilemma of this event.

“Wahh - unfair.” While Yumi and Yoshino-san were protecting the Green team basket Yumi saw something that made her cry out.

“The Purple team has Shimako-san carrying their basket.”

Looking where she pointed, it was certainly Shimako-san’s form running around in a dither.

“What’s unfair?” Yoshino-san wiped away a few flying balls as she asked.

“Have you ever heard that Shimako-san is quick-footed? Or very tall? Or able to move as nimbly as a mouse?” Which would you say, that or like a old cat that basks in the sun on the veranda. And even that might be flattering, poor thing.”

“...” Obviously thinking that the person who even said that was the poor thing.

“Right? It may not be a compliment to say it, but there’s only one reason they wanted Shimako-san to shoulder the basket. The authority of Rosa Gigantea.”

“Authority?”

“At the moment someone might cast a ball and possibly hit Shimako-san, they will have a moment of indecision. That’s what the Purple team is aiming at.”

“That’s a strategy?” This from Yoshino-san, who had just told them to focus on Red team, who saw some kind of difference. Anyway, Shimako-san’s carrying the basket seemed to touch off anger in Yoshino-san.

“I’m going in.”

“Eh-!?”

“I don’t have to hold back from Shimako-san, right?” As soon as she said this, she dashed for the Purple team’s basket.

Even if she called out to stop her, Yoshino-san was hardly the kind of person to hold off being reckless.

There’ no helping it, Yumi ran towards the Red team corps. Although she wasn’t tall, perhaps she could spot a crack in the wall of the allies protecting the basket. Along the way, she stopped to pick up fallen balls. The gym clothes were good for that – she could get a lot of them in the pockets and the cuffs.

The balls were specific colors, but for the purpose of the game that didn’t matter. The main point was to get as many balls in the basket as possible, so no one checked to see which color ball they were throwing. Therefore she picked up everything but green to throw away. Then earnestly threw. Next to her were her classmates focused on one thing – throwing balls into the Red team basket.

Nothing to do with Yoshino-san’s strategy, Yumi’s enemy was the Red team. Kanako-chan was putting serious effort into it; for the sake of response she would face this with all her power. You could say that she was thinking that she would deal with this in good faith.

They threw balls as if they were in a dream when the finishing pistol sounded. If you looked, now that it was over, there wasn’t a trace of the formations each team had originally formed to protect their baskets. As the time limit approached, each person had rushed the enemy formations.

From each team's basket the balls were taken out and gathered to be counted. "One, two..." As promised, each ball was thrown into the sky as it was counted. Because there were fewer balls in the basket, the team that ran out of balls first was first place.

"Seventy-eight, seventy-nine-"

Unlike the relay, not everyone had been light-footed, so there were thirty, forty in difference. The annual average from top to last was twenty balls or so.

"Eighty-five, eighty six-"

The first to have no more balls was Yumi's Green team. Continuing from there was Red team, White team, Pink team and by a narrow margin, Purple team.

And.

"How did that happen, the favored for victory Yellow team came in last place?" The raised voice came from the broadcasting area. But still, there were balls remaining in the basket.

"Saying that must be pretty painful for the favorites." As, one after the other, the many colored balls were thrown into the sky, Mami-san commented, subdued.

"That's because they became the target of every team. This way the relay won't matter."

"And you know that because of the Lillian Kawaraban predictions?" Yumi asked, surprised, as the last ball from the Yellow team's basket was thrown, pow, into the air.

"Of course. The leader is always handicapped." Mami-san nodded.

So then the reason Green team was able to take first place was because it hadn't been considered an enemy by the other teams.

"Is it a good thing or a bad thing?"

"After the unchecked team gets the high score, this time we started with a scrap value. From now on, it gets interesting."

"Ehhh...-"

“It’s all right. Now we can see exactly what differences there are in power. The other teams are sure to notice us now.”

“...”

Somehow, those words did not bring any happiness or comfort.

The yellow basket was at last empty. The total results were added to the scoreboard, and they were given the command to exit.

In the middle of all the students becoming dumplings at the exit gate, Shimako-san was there. Seeking her impressions on being the person who dodged, she only had one thing to say.

“Yoshino-san was scary.”

--Yeah.

Part 2.

As the second-years passed the third years coming in for “Ball Throwing”, they maintained a traditional style.

In front of each team’s basket a pole had been installed, into which balls were thrown. In contrast to “Ball Dodging,” the winner of this event had the most balls in their basket. Of course, the balls were beanbags.

“So, the third-years get to have all the fun.” Taking up their positions in the team area, Yoshino-san muttered while playing with the cheering goods. Before the third ball event, the first- and second-years had to risk their life and limbs as they ran hither and yon.

“Yeah, right.”

Certainly, standing in front of a basket and throwing beanbags up into it did not require great physical effort.

“It’s all right. The third-years are retiring, that’s why,” said Tsutako-san, appearing suddenly from behind them.

“What’s with that?” Leaning on a third-year’s shoulder, Yoshino-san’s face looked angry. She was sweaty and more or less just letting her feelings out as expected, but in generally good spirits and still seemed loose and relaxed.

“Hey, when one becomes a third year a lot goes on.” As Tsutako-san spoke, she grabbed the cardboard box of goods, thrust her hand into it and pulled out her camera.

“A lot?”

“Like choosing a school, examinations, preparations for studying abroad, looking for a job. That’s a lot. Because all of it tires one out, we should have a little sympathy for them.” After saying so much, Tsutako-san quickly took her leave. It was very like her somehow to have managed to get a camera there. So habitually did Tsutako-san carry a camera with her, it was odd that they didn’t hear the shutter in the middle of their own event. One couldn’t entrust such a thing to another year student on the Green

team, as in the morning all the different years participated in events and there was at least some time when there was no one watching over the team section. Unless a valuable is brought to the staff room, even if it's lost on school ground, the school doesn't do anything. However, if a camera is put in with the valuables, it's not easily put in and taken out.

The camera is valuable. But, she wanted to take pictures. As a desperate attempt, Tsutako-san had resorted to hiding it like a dog, hiding it very deep inside the cardboard box. Digging it up quickly, she was here and there, photographing the third-years' event. This was Tsutako-san's number one reason for living.

"That route, huh?" Yumi muttered as she watched the "Ball Throwing". The third years' retiring days were usually exhausting. That's what she was saying, in other words.

"What is Sachiko-sama doing after graduation?" Yoshino-san asked after hearing Yumi say 'That route, huh?'"

"I haven't asked." She returned the question, because she had answered. "How about Rei-sama?"

"She's going to Lillian U., isn't she? She decided that when she was young."

"Really? That's nice."

"If you have enough time to say 'that's nice' so jealously, why not just ask her already? If you keep hesitating about asking, then time will pass and it'll be useless, since there's so much in the world. For instance, the cast of the play for the school festival."

"Wahh-. Don't say it –" She covered her ears in haste. A little while ago, the stage play had become, for Yumi, an untouchable topic. When earlier she had tried to talk about it, it had been set aside.

"If you put off asking whether she's going to another university, it'll be a bigger shock."

"I know... But," If she didn't ask, she could postpone the shock.

“Geez. Why are you so passive about what Sachiko-sama will do? We’re talking about your onee-sama here, there’s no retreat from it.”

“Mm.” But, whether Yumi asked or didn’t ask, Sachiko-sama’s course had already been decided. So whether time passes and is unrecoverable wasn’t the problem in Yumi’s heart.

Green beanbags flew up towards heaven like a water fountain. White too, yellow, purple, pink and red. One by one the fountain of beanbags bubbled up, and Yumi’s heart was discontented.

From nursery school to high school, Sachiko-sama had attended Lillian. But that was no basis to hope that she would choose the university. But, no matter how many hopes Yumi had for that, life didn’t always go at her own convenience. If it looked like her father would be going to another country, she might choose a university overseas.

Onee-sama, what are you doing after graduation –

With a few short words, the matter could be settled.

The main thing was that she had no courage to even begin it now. She didn’t need Yoshino-san to point that out, she understood it well.

Bang bang.

At the sound of the pistol, the multicolored fountain disappeared. Each team took down their baskets and the count soon started.

“One, two, three...”

Since no other team thwarted one during this match, a victory was brought about purely by one’s own power.

The end result was that because of Rei-sama’s and the other’s perseverance, Yellow team came in first, recovering their former place in one crushing defeat. Regrettably, Green team came in fifth. You could say that that was their natural force of arms. Although, talking about force of arms for the “Ball Throwing” game seemed a little weird.

“How vexing. With all that throwing, how did we get fifth place?” Sachiko-sama complained when they returned to the Green team area.

Well, that would be because the other teams got more balls into the basket. Yumi squashed the words down just as they were on the verge of leaving her mouth. Anyway this was just Onee-sama’s desire and needed no answer. Losing is mortifying, saying something to someone totally settles one. Therefore just listening at a time like that is important.

“Coming back here about halfway I met Rei, whose face was filled with victory. Ah - so offensive. There must be some way to win.”

“Of course, Onee-sama. Please make it up on the “Centipede Race”.

“Can we do that? Yes, we can do that. So, it will be done.” As if to memorize the conjugation lesson, Sachiko-sama punched her fist into her palm. Pulling herself together, Sachiko-sama put the gakuran over her gym clothes and joined the cheering.

Hu-rray, hu-rray, Gr-e-en.

Boom, boom, boo-boo-boom, boom, boo-boo-boom.

“Yumi-san, you’ve completely become Sachiko-sama’s protector.” Although Yoshino-san made fun of her, her words secretly contained “It’s so I guess.” She had become fairly accustomed to times when Sachiko-sama was sulky or became hysterical, she thought. Nevertheless she still couldn’t ask about essential things. When she saw the mood on Sachiko-sama’s face, it would be too painful. She thought that she’d better not keep thinking over difficult things.

At the side of the track, the first-year’s massed game is beginning.

Balance in a V shape. Balance in a T shape. Supported headstand. Fan pose. Two-level pyramid.

Although it was called “group physical exercise” there was nothing acrobatic about it. However, every time a pose was decided, applause boiled up from the audience and the cheering sections.

“Fweet, fwee-fwee. The sound of the whistle was fresh.

Not to be rude, but this was more like a side dish, without points relevant to the score, which could be seen if one regarded it calmly from the side.

In the middle of all these first-years were Kanako-chan, Tōko-chan and Noriko-chan.

Although she might have a lot going on in her head, a first-year will suspend it all and just perform. Thinking this made Yumi very glad.

The Sports Festival is not just about the fight. Banding together to make it all happen, came the thought.

With a thunderous applause, the group physical exercises concluded, a great success. Confirming with the program, now was the team Pep Squad battle.

“First of all, the Red team cheer.” As soon as the announcement had been made, three red-clad students seethed over the rope barrier, flying out onto the track. Holding red flowers in their teeth and castanets in their hands. Other students had similar accoutrements.

This year, the Red team theme was, “Carmen.”

At the sound of a guitar, the light steps of the Red team Pep Squad marked time. “Ole!”

The finish of the performance was all of the flowers from the students’ mouths were thrown up into the air. When one could see them, the flowers were not roses, they were camellia. Of course, the Red team’s origin was Tsubaki Group.

“Next is Green team.” The order of the pep squad battle was from the team in lowest place. Sachiko-sama and the others in the gakuran corps stood in a single line on the track. Legs apart, hands behind their backs. The lines of their backs were awe-inspiringly straight as a pin. According to plan, Yumi advanced first out of the team area, drawing back to the side of the drum. A little separated, Yoshino-san stood on standby.

“Hoo-ray.” In the middle of it, the squad leader raised a left fist. “Hoo-ray.” This time it was the right hand. “Gr-e-en, Go!”

At this spoken signal, the entire Green Team called out “Hooray hooray Green” while beating time. As Sachiko-sama and the others beat their hands together, Yumi banged the drums with all her might, boom boom do do boom. Yoshino-san flourished the green flag, swish swish. As the 3-3-7 rhythm continued, the five wearing gakuran took out folding fans and began a marching song. Of course, the fans were green.

It was an orthodox style cheer, but the main thing was that it was totally cool.

Yumi thought about next year, going into Matsu Group and putting on the gakuran like Onee-sama. It was the established custom of Green team to wear gakuran, and Yumi had the feeling that going forward there was a high likelihood of them continuing to do so.

After Green came Pink team. This year’s theme was written on large posters that declared “Momotarou.” It was after all, the Momo group - pretty straightforward.

As expected, leading a dog and a monkey and pheasant, appeared Momotarou. The attendants were in the cheering section. Wearing cardboard faces, there were many dogs, monkeys, pheasants, singing at the top of their voices, “Momotarou-san, Momotarou-san.” When they finished, Momotarou sang out, “The demons have been vanquished~”, and threatened the Yellow team, White team, and Purple team with his fan. Likening the teams in places above them to demons.

However, none of those teams got angry; instead, they all smiled and looked happy. It was hardly mortifying when coming from a team two places behind, Yumi understood well, from Green team.

After Pink, White team came up to do the pep squad battle.

The theme was “Angels”. That was the story, but because the wings were stuck to the arms rather than the back, they looked more like pigeons. Although these wings would need more than just cheering power to be of use. Having five pigeons lead the cheer wasn’t a masterpiece... No, they really are angels.

Continuing on was Purple team with “Fuji Musume.”

“Huh?” Three popular third-years formed the core of the Pep Squad, and wasn’t that, right in the middle, second-year Shimako?

“...She was carried up here.” Yoshino-san nodded, her arms crossed. After all, she was Rosa Gigantea. It’s a suitable position for a leader.

“But so, the theme Wisteria Girl isn’t really about the members? Shimako-san is an accredited master of classic Japanese dance.”

“So it’s Wisteria Girl because Shimako is there, I guess.”

“Umm.”

Shimako is the lead, therefore, Fuji Musume is the lead. A prince is the lead, a chicken is the lead.

“Feels like the leader was decided by consensus.”

Confirming her friend’s rumor, Shimako began to dance on a purple bier upon the students’ shoulders. Made out of a light purple cotton, the kimono had been sewed on a machine so that from a distance it looked like a fine long-sleeved kimono. She also had a fairly done hand-painted bamboo hat. The entire grounds breathed with wonder at the elegant dance.

Then, last came the Yellow Team.

When entreated, Yoshino-san replied, “I haven’t seen it,” and with great effort it seemed she had managed to not go see it.

“Fwee-fweet fwee-fweet, fwee-fweet fwee-fweet, fwee-fweet fwee-fweet, fwee-fweet fwee-fweet.”

Suddenly, the bright sound of whistles echoed. Gaudily clothed in yellow costumes, Rei-sama and the others entered. They set a musical samba rhythm, shaking their bodies violently right and left.

“Canary...”

The sleeves were made up of who knows how many layers of frills, with some close resemblance to yellow fur.

Yes, canary. The canary festival, you could call it strangely.

“...It’s ...Yeah.”

Geez, Yoshino-san wouldn’t even look over there. She waited patiently with her face down for the whole thing to be over quickly.

“It’s not so bad, really.”

Rei-sama looked happy. The whole team was getting into the Latin style as it rose to a climax. Because it was men’s outfits, it wasn’t like it was a lot of skin showing Carnivale-type.

“Yumi-san, if it were your onee-sama, you wouldn’t say that.”

“You don’t think?”

“Yes. Try to imagine it.” Yoshino-san said. Sachiko-sama in a flouncy yellow blouse dancing around with boogie-woogie moves.

Yumi compliantly let the image float into her head of that situation. Somehow, it just wouldn’t come. In its place what floats to her mind, is the image of Onee-sama tossing the outfit away with “There is no way I will do it.”

Umm, definitely. That’s what would happen Yumi thought, as she stole a sideways glance at Sachiko-sama in gakuran.

“Fwee-fweet fwee-fweet, fwee-fweet fwee-fweet, fwee-fweet fwee-fweet, fwee-fweet fwee-fweet.”

The Canary Festival continued on.

Part 3.

Now then, after the hullabaloo of the Pep Squad battle came the second-years' "Tug of War."

Yumi donned white gloves and gathered in front of the entrance gates. Two teams by lottery met at the tug of war ground, the simple rule was that the winning team was awarded 20 points. In short, this was not by place, just which one won or lost. Of course, fortune controlled this probably. If your lottery was good, and you tugged against a weak team, the winning team had a good probability of moving up.

The result was:

Shimako's Purple Team's competition was a crushing defeat.

From one week ago, they were doing independent practice at lunchtime, that's why they won. Mami-san told them.

Yeah, in order to win, some such secret effort was necessary.

"Isn't that shameful. Why would they do such a thing."

Those harsh words came from, of course, Sachiko-sama. Having just recently been defeated at Ball Throwing, what high place is she looking down from that she'd forgotten that. It was totally Sachiko-sama-like to say that. To Yumi, which was the most shameful.

Moving on, there was the first-years' "Cancellation" to do. 30 sticks of about 1.5 meters are put in the center, which each team tries to carry to their area. The team with the most sticks gets the highest number of points. This is the last event in which all the first-years participated, from each one of the colors before the start, came a ruckus. You could see them pointing out the various locations of the sticks and saying, "You get that one" or "I'll take that one."

This event, which person went for which stick was, in large part, the strategy. In order to get the largest number of sticks, it was necessary to decide ahead of time which sticks to get.

"Ready..."

Bang.

At the start signal, the first-years dashed out simultaneously. The closer sticks were the most advantageous, therefore those students who had confidence in their running left those to their classmates and headed to take sticks further away.

One person could easily pull a stick out. For the sake of strategy, one might focus on pulling the stick out with an accomplice, hands wrapped around each other.

With four teams trying to pull the same stick out at the same time, the stick would not move. In many cases, after one step, reinforcements from the camp came and the stick was taken away.

Over each stick formed many dramas.

“What are they doing, those girls?” Standing next to her, Yoshino-san pointed, smiling.

“No way, they aren’t going to be able to take it, are they?”

Looking in the direction of her finger, Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan each held the end of one stick, not moving. No, it wasn’t that they weren’t moving, it looked like they were pulling against each other, their power balanced.

“What a spectacle.”

What kind of stratagem was this?

“...But, aren’t they both on Red team?”

“Yes. Is this some kind of gag?”

People in the audience were noticing and were pointing and laughing. When they saw the girls at the end of the outstretched finger, they would start to laugh.

The situation wasn’t funny per se, more like a couple of clowns at the circus, as around Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan the atmosphere seemed to say, “please laugh at us.” The god of laughter was surely smiling down upon them.

“Hey hey, what’s going on here?” The students doing broadcasting had also become aware of the situation. “In all the craziness, they don’t recognize their opponents. These two are both on the Red team, trying to take the same stick.” Excitedly, they reasoned out the situation.

However, Yumi understood. For both Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan, they did recognize an opponent, above taking the stick.

Enemy or ally, this was a risky thing. Now, the stick on which rests my hand, I do not want this person to take. No, I want to take it from this person, was the feeling. All at once their hostility gushed out at one another. Absolutely, natural enemies.

“These two are showing fierce determination. No one from any other team, or the Red team will put out a hand. What is their intention? If they don’t move soon, the stick won’t make it back to any camp before time is up. It’ll be a total waste.”

Not really understanding why they did this, people were just surrounding and gazing at the two of them. This was unheard of, and no one could judge where reinforcements should come from – the other teams or the Red Team.

“Ohh. One person from the Red team, a brave student, flies out. So, how is she going to deal with this?”

“It’s Noriko-chan.”

Brave or not, Noriko grabbed the very middle of the stick and pushed them along towards the Red team camp. The pressure of pulling and pushing, which had been in balance, was suddenly upset and in the stick was eh-eh-eh-pulled along.

As expected of Noriko. When it’s time to do a thing, she does it. As the other teams stood around and watched them in amazement, the ending pistol sounded.

The stick arrived at the Red team camp held in the hands of three people. By a hair’s breadth, they made it in time.

With the last one counting, the Red team had done well, getting six sticks. There were calculated to be five sticks per team, so that was a magnificent result. Green team had four. With that, they were now the lowest place.

“What is this?” Sachiko-sama shook angrily, when she saw the scoreboard. When they saw that, everyone on the Green team shook with fear. Elegant Rosa Chinensis was trembling all over with wrath. This wrath must be appeased.

Yoshino-san, with the feeling that she'd say, “Just like always”, calmly made a flower with color paper that she set on her middle finger, because only people who didn't really know Sachiko-sama would have their hearts race over this happening.

“Y...Yumi-sama, please...” Whuh, the first-years were pushing her ahead of them. She had used the centipede race event once to make her recover, it wouldn't be effective again. Moreover, it was time for the second-years' dance and she had to be making her way to the entrance gate. Glancing sideways to see what Onee-sama's state was, her anger hadn't yet abated.

Right. She had been the one to boast of aiming at absolute victory and here they were in last place to her chagrin. Sachiko-sama who hates losing. She can't forgive this state of affairs.

Then.

“Onee-sama, here.” Yumi held out drumsticks.

“What is this?”

“Please, don't hesitate to drum. It's what the instrument is for. Now then, I'm going to do the ‘Dance of the Flowers.’ So, here.” Inclining her head quickly, she grabbed up her flower prop and took her leave.

At least with this, she could avoid a situation in which the beautiful handkerchief is ripped, the sleeve of the gakuran is torn, the folding fan is broken or the banner is rent. Because there isn't time now to calm her down, this has the feeling of an emergency measure. When she returned she'd be sure to do some follow-up.

“Yumi-san, hurry, hurry.” Her classmates were standing by behind the entrance gate waving her forward.

“Com-ing.” As she answered, she shot a quick look over her shoulder.

(What’s that...? Just now) Somewhere back there, she thought she had seen a face she knew.

(But who?) It wasn’t Dad or Mom. She checked to make sure she knew where they were.

(Where?)

It was understandable because in this direction there were, in the area of the track many students and families all mingling, so it was just face, face, face. She couldn’t be sure, now, even what direction she had been facing before.

What was it, that feeling of something she hadn’t seen in a while.

“What are you doing, we’re starting.” Mami-san had turned back to the gate to drag her into place, the music was already playing and the White team students were just entering.

(Concentrate, concentrate) Think about it later.

Putting the flowers on her fingers, Yumi walked out onto the inner field. For the sake of this day, since the second term had begun, they had practiced every day in gym class.

There were three colors of flowers. Pink, blue and yellow. Yumi and the others of the Pine group were, along with Shimako-san’s Fuji group, using blue flowers.)

First come the blossoms. In time with the music, the petals were slowly carried out.

The buds blossom. The buds blossom.

Before long, the entire area inside the track was filled with three colors of blooming flowers.

The music changed and the flowers sought out the rays of sunshine gladly.

The flowers withstand the rain.

And the wind scatters the petals apart, one and two at a time, like a whole side of falling cherry blossoms. Pink or blue or yellow flowers, there was no difference. When the wind stopped, the last pose was of six, small colorful flowers.

Although they gave it their all, regrettably she wasn't able to complete it for whatever reason. In the family seats was Dad, who had in his hand camera, whose film would be developed, but not seen by anyone.

When the dance was over, as she headed back, she passed Sachiko-sama, who was going out for the centipede race.

“Yumi.” Onee-sama was smiling lightly, her humor restored and the stress gone, Yumi thought.

“Did you bang the drum?”

Looking kind of happy that she asked, Sachiko-sama said, “Silly,” and fixed the position of Yumi’s headband. “It was a musical dance program. I couldn’t have drummed, even if I wanted to.”

“Ah.”

“When I realized, I had to laugh. In any case, getting so irritated is ridiculous.”

“Yeah.”

In other words, the drums had been indirectly effective.

Sachiko-sama’s anger had been appeased by the medicine.

“You really are a miraculous girl.” Sachiko-sama said earnestly, her little sister could feel it was part of a complicated mood.

“Um. That was meant as a compliment, right...?”

“Of course it is.” Sachiko-sama nodded hugely, then hurried to join her classmates at the entrance gate. Halfway there, as if “ah, right”, she turned to look back over her shoulder and offered, one more, this time genuine, compliment.

“The dance was good, your dancing was totally wonderful.”

“T...thank you –” The compliment made her happy but she really didn’t understand it, even as she hit the drums to cheer Sachiko-sama on as she made her appearance for the centipede race.

The consequence of that was that Green team moved into third place, more importantly Red team was in sixth place in total points, in a sudden reversal. The only remaining event of the morning was the club relay, and being announced at lowest position midway through the day held a stigma which was said to be inescapable.

Part 4.

The difference is five points, huh?" Yoshino-san said, after looking at the scoreboard.

"Five points or not, a victory is a victory." Overhearing, Sachiko-sama stated definitively.

Right now it was good that they were winning, but was such a narrow margin really the kind of situation where one could use and comprehend it as that phrase?

No, because Sachiko-sama would simply coolly disregard anything to the contrary. If she thought five points was a win, then she'd smile... Yeah.

"Club members who are going to participate in the club relay, please gather at the entrance gate, please."

Now then, it was that flower of the morning activities, the "Club Relay."

The six winners of the preliminaries would advance, the six batons would be carried around the track twice.

First of all were the culture clubs. Comparing these to the athletic clubs, there were many harsh words, which contained a "bustling" element. In place of a baton, these clubs ran with a small prop symbol.

For instance, the **rakugo** club ran with a folding fan. The art club ran with a paintbrush. The flower arranging club ran with a flower arrangement. The brass band ran with a clarinet.

The handicrafts club had a bamboo scale used in making traditional Japanese clothing. ---solving that.

"Hey, why is Mami-san here?"

Each team was being introduced. In lane six was "Lillian Kawaraban," the original newspaper club. A rolled-up newspaper served as their baton.

“I pass. I have no physical strength. I’m perfectly happy to take notes on the condition of all the club members from here.” Mami-san gave her reason for missing the preliminary round, since other members of the club has more stamina. If they really hadn’t had enough members to run, they could have let in retired member Tsukiyama Minako-sama.

“Then why are you on the Athletic Festival Executive Committee?”

“As a member of the executive committee, I was responsible for arranging who the representative players were.”

“Hoho!”

That was the principle reason.

“But even committee members are players.” Yoshino-san interposed, looking jealous. Yoshino-san has somehow ended up being a participant in the great bird of the Sports Festival, the “Color Opposition Relay.”

“You didn’t say that you didn’t want to do it. Yoshino-san, your fault.” With that, Mami-san was being a bit harsh.

“Pfft.” And, Yoshino-san was being easy to understand. The nail was hit on the head, she was just struggling... But really, today she had been exceptionally prone to losing her temper easily. Yumi wondered why.

“L...look, look, Yoshino-san. It’s starting.” Trying to draw her attention by pointing at the track.

Yoshino-san ran her fingers through her bangs. “I know, I know. I just don’t want to think about it.”

“...Eh?”

“Yes. Not having said I didn’t want to do it and being wrong.” Heaving a great sigh, made her appear reluctant, or full of self-loathing. “But at this late date, I can’t pull out.” Or maybe it was something else.

Down on the field, preparations were complete.

In between the bang of the pistol and the baton hand-offs, Yoshino-san told her story in dribs and drabs. The truth was, it was a reckless promise.

When she heard “reckless promise”, Yumi’s heart pounded for an instant. Her moment when she exchanged a promise with Kanako-chan, came immediately to mind.

“A promised with whom? Rei-sama?” Yumi’s voice cracked a little as she asked the question.

“Uhn-uhn.” Yoshino-san shook her head back and forth. “Torii Eriko-sama.”

“Eriko-sama... Ah!” As she shouted, Yumi pressed her hand against her mouth. However, her voice was swallowed by a cheer, so it didn’t stand out. Sachiko-sama wasn’t at her side at the moment, ears from hell Mami-san was cheering on the wonderful conditioning of the newspaper club relay as if in a dream, so the two Tsubomi were, for a moment, unnoticed. On the track a dead heat was unfolding.

“Yumi-san, you met her too?” Yoshino-san continued after a pause.

“Um. No, I didn’t meet her per se, but I saw her from a distance... That’s it.”

Before, that feeling of “who was that”, it was Eriko-sama. She wasn’t in school uniform, so she wasn’t instantly recognizable.

Now, Yoshino-san having said, “Eriko-sama” confirmed it. There was no mistake, it had been Eriko-sama.

“So, as I suspected, I’m the only one she appeared in front of.”

Yoshino-san, you’re talking about her as if she was a ghost.

“I had thought that, when she graduated, that settled that. But it looks like we’ll be rivals for the rest of our lives.”

“Rivals? With Eriko-sama?”

“Yes. Who else would it be? With Rei-chan between us, she’s opposite me.”

“__”

Yeah, that kind of idle curiosity would be like Eriko-sama.

Of course, there were many fans of Rei-sama in school, but Yoshino-san did not regard the majority as enemies. Related by blood, spending day and after day together for seventeen years and practically living together in houses that were close by each other, Yoshino-san wouldn't be matched by too many companions.

Except one person. Eriko-sama alone was the exception. For the reason alone that Eriko-sama was Rei-sama's onee-sama, she would have to follow her orders. The person who could freely move "Yoshino's Rei-chan." That there should be in existence anyone who could do that outside herself, Yoshino-san could not forgive.

"So, when did you meet Eriko-sama?" Yumi inquired. In the relay, the batons had been passed twice.

"Pretty early on. Maybe before "Dodgeball"? About halfway towards the entrance gate, a voice called out to me."

"Really." So that's why Yoshino-san had been in such a foul mood the whole time.

She had met up with Eriko-sama and made a reckless promise, so she was self-conscious. Probably, she had fallen into a trap of self-abhorrence. So when she saw Rei-sama plunge into her optimistic "Canary Festival" her irritation came to a climax. So the causes for her temper were various and many throughout the day, and her words mixed with her feelings.

"So, what did you promise?"

"To introduce her to my soeur." Yoshino-san fiddled with the front part of the headband tied around her head, staring into **the distance.** The meaning of the words not sinking in, thinking she might have misheard, Yumi asked again.

"Who?"

"Me. To Eriko-sama."

Yoshino-san introduce her sœur. Then, the other party was Eriko-sama. --- Inside Yumi's head she arranged the sentence. A mysterious encounter. Information that, until now she hadn't heard, now came floating lightly to the surface.

"Congratulations. Who's the other party?"

"There isn't one. You know that, Yumi-san."

Yeah, guess so. But hear me out for the moment. "If there isn't anyone, how can you introduce her to your sœur?"

"That was why it was a reckless promise, like I said. Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard."

That really was a reckless promise. You could say that at the point of promising, the promise itself became scrap paper... Huh?

"It was inadvertent. She was saying that en bouton need to take sœur, and it was like nag nag nag from a mother-in-law or something. Because Rei-chan is spoiling me or like Rei-chan is to blame at all. To make matter worse, she had heard from somewhere that you had a candidate, and that was in her list of complaints too."

"M...me?" Yumi waved her hand back and forth confusedly at the misunderstanding. Of course, Eriko-sama wasn't the one in front of her.

"It doesn't matter what the real situation is. She was just looking for material to provoke me. I wonder if things aren't going well with her lover. It's been like that for a long time, she'll make fun of me because she's bored."

If you know that's how it is, then why are you jumping on the provocation, Yoshino-san?

"So you inadvertently let it slip that you would introduce you to your sœur?"

"Sort of. I said that right now it doesn't seem like much, but there is a first-year that interests me and I might hand over my rosary."

“It’s sort of intrusive, but it looks like she achieved her objective.”

“That was her objective. Obviously.”

No. Obviously, normally one doesn’t make a promise of an introduction when there is no candidate, does one?

“But you know, did Eriko-sama think ‘I need to see her’ just to extract that promise?

“Seems like it, doesn’t it?”

“Seems like. Wait, don’t tell me, Yoshino-san, you didn’t go and agree to a specific time and place for this introduction?”

“I did. But, ‘when’ was part of her persistence.”

Snapping Turtle Eriko-sama. Yumi suddenly remembered the nickname. Somewhere, someone had said that, she couldn’t remember exactly.

“So, when did you promise for?”

“Well, after this, there’s the class trip and the school festival rattling around, so after those are completed. So, the month after next at the intramural kendo club meet? Then.”

“Eh? Ehh??”

The kendo club meet wasn’t even two months away. How was she supposed to meet and make someone her sœur in two months. It wasn’t likely that she’d succeed.

Certainly, for Yoshino-san a period of less than two months would not be the problem condition. “Really, to tell me that she wanted to see it soon, this was a good place to talk. That it’s an impossibility, because Eriko-sama repeated it over and over, she understood... Yes, she did understand that. And I know that I have to give it some thought, to look at how the problem can be cleared, and put some effort into enjoying that part. She really understands my personality.” Remembering that, Yoshino-san felt double chagrin.

“What are you going to do?”

“Whatever I have to. I’ll take a sœur. Then I won’t look back.”

“Take a sœur?”

“Eriko-sama laughed when she said, ‘The sky’s the limit,’ apologetically. But I’ve come to realize that it was an opportunity. I’ll put some serious effort into it.”

Opportunity. Serious effort.

Namely, the words that Yumi cannot bear to accept.

“Thinking about it, in neither April or May did some party strike me when I saw her, so without such pressure being applied as far as possible, maybe I didn’t try to find a sœur. That’s probably it. When Sachiko-sama took Yumi-san as a sœur, because of the situation with the role of Cinderella, it forced her to move proactively. Look at Shimako-san, the situations with both Sei-sama and Noriko-chan took meddling before they became sœur, didn’t they, right. This might be a good chance.”

Ah, positive Yoshino-san. A horse led against her will to the water, gallantly drinking.

“Hey you two.” Grabbing their arms and thrusting her face forward with a wry smile, Mami-san joined them. “Though you are talking as if it’s a secret and I can’t hear it, you’re audible, is that okay?”

“Eh.”

Who knows if it’s all right. If it was audible, then there was no helping it. While they were talking in the middle of a dream, the culture club relay had finished. Although it had unfolded in front of her eyes, who had come in first at the goal, she didn’t know.

“But, Mami-san, you won’t write a report on this, will you.” Yumi said. That was in response to Mami-san’s earlier inquiry “Is it okay?”

“Yumi-san, where is that self-confidence coming from?”

“Because if Mami-san wants to write a truly perfect article, I think she should wait for the official announcement. Until the opportunity is ripe, type quietly and reservedly. Of course, Yoshino-san will give permission for research to be conducted ahead of time.”

There, they don't have to worry. If she spoke glibly, the possibility of good negotiations were higher.

"Um, Yumi-san. You've got me where it hurts. In that case, there's nothing I can do as editor of the Lillian Kawaraban except anticipate that time." Mami-san showed herself to lament grievously. However, even if Yumi had not said anything, she might have had to do the same.

"Well, I want to do a good article about the Yamayurikai. Being hasty won't make that happen. Right now I have enough information, I can let this swim." Saying this, Mami-san preceded to grab her pencil and begin noting down the results of the relay.

Sports Festival to Class Trip to School Festival. There were certainly many events this semester to write articles about. However, there was a pause in November when Yoshino-san would have to put out results. At that moment in time, the Lillian Kawaraban will be in a fallow season.

"Hey, the athletic clubs are running."

The other half of the club relay, the athletic clubs were getting ready to go. The rules were the same as for the culture clubs. However, they used standard batons. Running with a ball or racket would get in the way.

"Where's the kendo club?"

"They drop out after preliminaries. It's that way every year." Yoshino-san said, as if it were trivial. "It's not just out of respect. Honest to a fault, they run with **hakama** flapping around their legs. They are unlikely to win and advance to the next round."

"...I see."

Nonetheless, every year the kendo club continued to make a determined challenge. It was a hardship. No, they probably went out from obstinacy.

Then, that left as the finalists, the track and field club, the tennis club, the basketball club, the physical athletics club and the judo club.

“The track and field team was tough in the first race.” Mami-san said, closing her notebook.

Speaking of the relay, surely this was the track and field team’s specialty.

Six of their short-distance runners were gathered to participate. Of course Yumi’s classmate Itsue-san was one of them, about three more were also entries.

Which club glittered with the most intense fighting spirit. Without exception, there were no smiles. Just a little while ago in the same area, the culture clubs had been totally different.

The athletically oriented clubs saw the sports festival as a something to look forward to. –One could really feel that spirit.

Bang!

No flying out. A nice start.

One by one they covered their allocated distance. But, which participants were flying by. Fast, fast. At that point, the baton had been passed twice. At the top was the track and field club. But tennis club wasn’t defeated. Although the lead was by two bodies, they were pretty close in second.

“At last, at last, next up is Itsue-san, huh. Let’s see if she shows solid running,” Yoshino-san muttered. Checking up on Itsue-san’s condition, estimating for the afternoon’s Color Opposition Relay.

Noticeably, there were no runners from Green team in any year. Apparently the key to victory, Itsue, was the only one on the track and field club.

“They are still in the lead. The baton is about to be passed to Itsue-san.”



“Wah.” As expected of the track and field club. Itsue-san was also fast.

“Huh, Itsue-san has slowed down.”

“Eh?”

Following the pointing finger, Yumi did not immediately understand. The space between the tennis club had lessened, but it still looked pretty open. However, it was only noticeable because the third place was so slow. You could say that the softball club was chasing the tennis club.

“Because I was weak at doing sports, I watched them all.” Shimazu Yoshino. Interests: Watching sports.

“I wonder if something’s wrong with Itsue-san.” Saying that, even if she was in a slump, Itsue-san was still faster than Yumi at her top speed, and in that case, all she had to do was preserve the lead until she could pass the baton to the next person.

Indeed, the form of the track and field club members was magnificent. As she thought that, she looked at the final anchor.

As the baton was being passed, she sucked in her breath.
(What the heck is that?)

Neither a girl, nor a high school student, nor a Japanese person had speed like that. She’d never seen that kind of running from a student in gym class.

(C...cheetah?)

There was no catching this cheetah. In front of everyone, she crossed the white tape at the goal.

“The captain of the field and track team. She’s in Rei-chan’s class.” Yoshino instructed sotto voce. If they had such a person, no wonder the Yellow team was a favorite to win. That kind of fast wasn’t at an inter-high level, it was more like at an international level.

After all, the anchor, running alone, the track and field club took first place. With joie de vivre. And they lived happily ever after.

And with that, the boisterous “Club Relay”, and the Sports Festival morning portion ended without incident.

Casting Aside Embarrassment of One's Parents

Part 1.

For lunch on Sports Day, one went to any spot one liked; the team area, back to the classroom, in the school's central garden, or to the cafeteria.

As everyone spread out to those places have lunch together with their families, it seemed that this year it might be a little impossible. The parent's seats were jam packed, and then on top of that students were trying to squeeze in, looking for a spot that was left over. There were people who could spend all of lunchtime looking for an empty space on the grounds to be together with mother and father.

“Yumi.”

The “Club Relay” was over and, after about an hour's rest, the members of the Pep Squad would be gathering together in the front, Sachiko-sama, holding a nylon sheet came up to Yumi.

“Yes.”

“Let's go... No, I mean, lead on.”

“Whah?” Yumi asked. She could understand, “Let's go” but what did she mean by “lead on.”

“You have to pick up your lunch in the classroom... Don't you?” As they talked, students passed by on each side with ““I'm going now,”. Because it would be bad to interrupt a conversation between sœur, because one wants to get to the place where one can eat lunch right away, and because during this time to relax, the newspaper club's Mami-san and photography club's Tsutako-san are rolling around taking photos and they wanted to be somewhere else.

“...Lunch? Ah, yes. Wherever we go together is fine, our classroom is fine...”

“Yes.”

“It's not possible to get all the work done anyway, recess is so...” As usual, Yumi's reasoning was off.

Even if they were in different years, being able to eat lunch together made the day flow by pleasantly, Yumi thought.

Where was Yoshino-san, who had specially stalked into the enemy camp to get Rei-sama.

Though Yoshino-san was irritated at Rei-sama, when Rei-sama appeared, she looked happy, just a little. As soon as she realized that she was showing that her mood had improved, she made a bad mood face, but for one second, Yumi had seen her real expression. Yoshino-san loved Rei-sama.

“So then, where would you like me to lead you, Onee-sama?” Was there something she wanted done before she sat down to eat lunch? There was no work for the Yamayurikai today, so where should she be leading Sachiko-sama--. No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn’t figure it out.

“Has it been decided?”

“Decided?” Been decided, she said. When, where, who is making what decision. Inside her head thoughts whirled around over and over. “I give in. Onee-sama, please explain.”

“You’re making fun of me, even though you know what I mean.” Sachiko-sama’s face flushed red just slightly.

“No way...” That’s just absurd. There’s no way Yumi would be that reckless to tease Sachiko-sama like that. ---Well, that could have a lot of meanings.

“Really, you haven’t hit on it?”

“...I’m sorry.” Although she hadn’t been criticized yet, for the moment, Yumi apologized. There was always the possibility that she had inadvertently been rude to Onee-sama, it wasn’t beyond the pale.

“Then, don’t you plan on introducing me?”

“Introducing Onee-sama? ...Um, who to?”

“Your parents.” Sulkily, Sachiko turned away. There, Yumi finally noticed.

“Ah.”

“It’s not ‘ah’. Why are you being so thick-headed about it? I’ve been, you know, all morning, no, since last night when I couldn’t sleep, worrying endlessly about it over and over.”

“Onee-sama, you couldn’t sleep?” Somehow that made her happy. Yumi smiled. Sachiko-sama who was filled with self-confidence. The cause of her sleeplessness was meeting her little sister’s parents.

“Of course. Meeting Yumi’s father and mother, would I properly greet them, that kind of thing. Or whether I would make a good impression, that kind of thing.” Coming from the Fukuzawa couple, this comment would make sense; coming from Sachiko’s mouth it seemed a little funny.

“If it’s from Onee-sama, I’m sure whatever comes out will be fine.” To the extent that she will stand magnificently upright and greet them as if they were nobility from a foreign land.

“Yumi’s parents are an exception.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t want them to dislike me.”

“...”

Ah, Yumi recalled. Onee-sama might appear to have confidence, but not when it was the first time to have met. The evening of their Valentine date she had confessed to having been very nervous about calling Yumi’s home. At her summer home, muttering that she could not defend Yumi. At the Saionji’s house, at Great-grandmother’s party, when Yumi had done a musical performance in lieu of a present. All of Sachiko-sama’s piled-up confidence collapsed very easily. Always when it was something to do with Yumi. Perhaps Yumi was Sachiko-sama’s Achilles heel.

Therefore, Yumi realized, that for Sachiko-sama this was a big problem that swelled.

“Then, I’ll lead on.” Yumi began to walk on ahead.

Although it was a little, no, very, embarrassing, there was a distinction. Compared to the beating of Onee-sama's heart, this was nothing.

"They're okay as parents." Despite sending their daughter to a girls' private school the Fukuzawa family continued to be commoners. Her father was easily excited and her mother was careless. However, they were both kind, honest people. Not really "okay as parents" but, for Yumi that was a boast. Now Yumi would be introducing her parents whom she boasted about to her onee-sama she boasted about.

"I hope I'll be all right." As the time approached, Sachiko-sama began to hesitate.

Seeing her hands begin to tremble Yumi nodded hugely. "Of course you will. "Dad and Mom already like you."

"Really?" With an atmosphere like she couldn't believe it, Sachiko asked in return. As if this was her being soothed and not really a consideration.

"Even though you haven't yet met, I know it. Because for me, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama is a very important existence."

"Ah... I see." Sachiko-sama muttered, as if she understood. "Because I always talk about you in that way to my parents."

--There.

Part 2.

And so, Yumi lead Sachiko-sama to the place where her family was seated, to present her to parents who were not expecting another daughter, and who were stuffing their faces with fried food in one hand and onigiri in the other.

“This is my onee-sama, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.”

Therefore, at the time Yumi made the introduction this way, they grasped the information, and lifted their heads in a “Ah, okay,” sort of feeling, then, “Huh?” for one second were silent, then at the same time gulped down whatever they had in their mouths.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m always indebted to Yumi-san.” Onee-sama greeted them a little tensely.

“Ah, the debt is all mine, really.” For a moment the atmosphere was one of embarrassment. Somehow the feeling of it being a scene from a television drama where the heroine introduces her lover to her parents floated around them. In that case, the father who decides and who is sitting makes an unpleasant face and crosses his arms. And the mother, who has a nervous temperament sucks in her breath with an exclamation of disappointment.

Nevertheless.

“Cough cough.” In reality, both parents looked like they wanted to cough up the food in their throats, having been presented with this person for introduction without warning.

“Mom, Dad.” At being called, the response was cough, cough. Therefore Yumi was exceptionally embarrassed, probably the most embarrassed she’d ever been in her life.

Such a fuss just when Sachiko-sama has come, because of this accident, something in her nature was loosened Well, she was a little worried that they might be choking to death.

“Excuse for me being rude. I’m Yumi’s father.”

“I’m her mother.”

Sucking in a deep breath, her parents had managed to find their lost voices.

Ah, if only they could dig under that vinyl sheet and bury themselves in a hole underground, the three members of the Fukuzawa family thought.

(That would leave Yūki, sorry. You'll just have to live strong by yourself.)

Anyway, speaking about making room for one's family, the place they were sitting was crowded in with many other families. They were all in the middle of enjoying their lunches, so digging such a hole would be impossible.

However, despite there being no hope of digging a hole for her unforgivable parents, they had not moved, indeed looked as if they had been knocked down, while she stood looking down at them. Certainly, they looked at least like funeral attendants who had gone astray and found themselves in the middle of a picnic.

But you two know well how much Yumi likes Sachiko-sama. This is their first meeting with the object of their daughter's worship, and their failure to respond properly was causing her to fall into a pit of despair.

“Ah, fried food.” Sachiko-sama said suddenly. “It looks tasty.” Looking down from above on the nested boxes stuffed full of **okazu**.

“How, oh-” Although Mom seemed secretly ill at ease, she calmly reached into the plastic bag and pulled out a toothpick, with which she raised a piece of fried chicken, “Please, please,” she held it out to Sachiko-sama. Yeah, she was that kind of person.

“Is it all right? Thank you very much.” Sachiko-sama took it without refusing, carrying it to her mouth. And three people held their breath and watched, until she muttered the single word, “Delicious.”

“The lunch made by Yumi’s mother was very delicious. When... Right, when we were going the summerhouse, you made us lunch, right? That was the time I was thinking of.”

Sachiko-sama turned towards Yumi as she spoke – as expected, Yumi was tongue-tied. “Ah, right, right, and Onee-sama, you were overcome by the umeboshi and asparagus.”

“Overcome is an exaggeration. But, our summerhouse manager did do a menu that was the same for our return trip. The onigiri was made very well with the koshihikari, and as expected the nori was perfectly crispy, I vaguely remember there being two types...” Sachiko-sama spoke with large gestures, giving good service. As she spoke, it gave Mom and Dad’s good spirits time to rise to the surface.

“If you please, have an onigiri.”

“Oh, I don’t want to appear as if I was asking..... But, since you offered, thank you, I will.” After wiping her hands with the proffered wet towel, Onee-sama seated herself on the vinyl sheet as if it were perfectly normal and proceeded to eat an onigiri.

Today, Mom’s onigiri were the umeboshi type. The contents were, of course the standard every day umeboshi.

“Thank you so much for the food.” In the end, in the time it took to eat one rice ball, all was harmony and it was if Sachiko-sama had come over to visit relatives without whom she was familiar.

“Since Sachiko-san’s family could not be here today, we’ll make sure that we root extra hard for the Green team.” That the noble daughter of the Ogasawara Group was the onee-sama of their cute daughter, the one that they call Sachiko-san, absolutely made her parents giddy; upon meeting her, they were relieved to find that she was a fairly typical young lady.

After spending some time relaxing, or you could say, living around the four corners of the vinyl sheet, there was no mistaking that with thanks for the kind offers, it was time for Sachiko-sama and Yumi to turn back towards the school.

“They’re quite wonderful.” Sachiko-sama smiled as they walked.

“R...really?”

“I can really see how they are Yumi’s parents.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t have the feeling of being meant as a compliment.” Here parents were seen to be “succhakamecchaka” that was understandable. That didn’t really match with the previous words that they were wonderful.

“It was a compliment. You have a cheerful family. Very normal-seeming.”

“… …”

Of course whether that was a compliment depended on how you looked at it. Sachiko’s family was pretty unique, so a normal family was something to admire, but it was embarrassing if she thought that all that a little while ago was normal. Absolutely mortifying.

By the time they reached the path by the Library, they slammed into Mami-san, coming from the side. As she walked, she was furiously writing some memo in her notebook, although what could have her so busy they did not know.

“Lillian Kawaraban?”

“No, Sports Festival Executive Committee.” But after the morning check-in was done, supposedly they didn’t really have much work. There was probably a change in their job.

“When we’re done eating, would you like some assistance?”

“Ah, really? That would be a big help. Although I should say that Yumi-san can’t really help.”

“Why?”

“Even if they are so busy that they would borrow a cat’s paw, the teacher won’t let the student make the test. Right?” Mami-san closed her notebook with “Later,” and left at a quick pace. Halfway, she began looking back and forth around the school grounds, looking like she was checking for something, but what it was Yumi didn’t know.

“Onee-sama, did you understand that?” Watching over Mami-from behind, Yumi asked Sachiko-sama.”

“Yes,” came the answer immediately. “Yumi is participating in the ‘Scavenger Hunt Race’ this afternoon. Don’t you think it probably is something to do with that?” she said.

“The Scavenger Hunt Race’.....?”

Last year, when Yumi had watched the Lillian Jogakuen Scavenger Hunt Race, she had wondered what kind of people participated in that, then promptly forgot about it. So, when Sachiko-sama pointed out that Mami-san, like several other people on the Sports Festival Executive Committee were probably doing research for it, she didn’t even want to think about it.

Part 3.

They took their lunch boxes from the classroom, then the two of them went to the old greenhouse.

Because the weather had continued to be nice all day, the rays of sunshine had penetrated the glass making it rather warm, although it had cooled slightly, the demerit of it being hot was surpassed by the merit of it not being a particularly popular place, which won out, and they spread their lunches out.

Sachiko-sama had already eaten one onigiri and one piece of fried chicken but, opened her bento with her tongue out and ate. The bento was wrapped in paper with a high-class restaurant's name written on it. Usually the servants made her her lunch, today must be a rest day for them.

And so the sisters spent some time alone without outsiders, after which they reversed their route and returned to the grounds.

Although there was still about 15 minutes left before 1:00 when the afternoon events were to begin, the assembly music wafted over the grounds, and the area inside the track became the circle for the folk dance. This was self participation, so students who wanted to participate freely joined in the circle.

“Onee-sama, let’s go dance.”

“Eh, but...”

“It’ll be fun, promise.”

Sachiko flinched a little, but let herself be led by the hand and they joined the circle. Thereupon, instead of gazing upon the participants from a distance, suddenly she was promoted to one of the common people who did folk dances.

There might not ever be another chance to dance with her beloved Rosa Chinensis. This was totally different from Yumi’s hesitation last year to jump into the circle.

The music was a medley from “Oklahoma.” Since Sachiko-sama was so much taller than Yumi, she took the man’s part.

First, both turn in the same direction and standing slightly obliquely side-by-side, one put a hand on top of the shoulder, then step.

From there, palms are wrapped around each other, and you turn slightly towards one another as appropriate, and stepping out with the heel, boom, and the foot behind also settles with a boom, reversing direction three times before a partner change.

(Ah... Onee-sama's...)

Thinking about it, this dance really brings a pair together, as if they are the same person, one by one with the next partner.

Led by the music, Sachiko-sama advanced further away. Because the number of participants increased, she might go all the way around twice, possibly. As she thought about it, a new person appeared.

She became inattentive, as she carelessly greeted her new partner, not noticing who was standing by. It was a fairly conspicuous existence.

“Kanako-chan.” Why are you here? Was what she was saying.

No, obviously because she was a student here at the school, so it shouldn’t seem strange; that she should her he partner honestly surprised her. Not being the kind of person who cooperates with her classmates easily, she would never have predicted that she’d participate on her own in the folk dance.

Because she had been surprised, she hadn’t immediately stood next to her. Yumi glided up to Kanako-chan’s body, who reached out a hand to put on her shoulder. A little late, Kanako-chan’s hand arrived.

“Have you decided upon a penalty?” As they stepped out in the dance, Yumi inquired. Because Kanako-chan was so tall, in order to face her face, Yumi had to look over her shoulder and upwards.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“If I win, you have to assist me.”

“Eh?”

“Whether you know what it is or not won’t affect whether you win or lose, right? Therefore, it’s no problem.”

What’s this not saying because of fastidiousness. She didn’t want to find out for the first time after she had lost what the penalty was.

Certainly it could be that way. But, interest was interest. If it was something self-centered or impossible that she had to pass on, she wanted it to be said in advance, so she could prepare Kanako-chan to have some self-control.

But self-control or denial – to what degree would it be? Would preparation be necessary or not?

“At least give me a hint. What would it entail?”

“If the conditions are followed, it will be completed quickly.”

They separated and lifted their hands, standing close, but apart.

“Conditions?” Apparently Yumi’s idea of a penalty is different than Kanako-chan’s. Using her until the day of the school festival was, comparatively, a heavy burden, what this was frightened her momentarily.

Kanako-chan’s grin remained with Yumi, as the girl slid over to the next person. As a replacement, Tōko-chan appeared.

“To –”

To Yumi’s obvious question, “Why?” Tōko-chan was prepared with an answer, which she supplied.

“Because. Everyone wants to dance with Rosa Chinensis, so they have all taken the woman’s part. There weren’t enough people, so latecomers were put here.”

So that was the reason that there weren’t many tall people on the men’s part line.

“Anyway, if I took the same part as Kanako-san, then there’s no chance I’ll have to dance with her.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Two diminutive people dancing to an ‘Oklahoma’ medley. Completely unlike just before, their faces were on the same level, which felt strange.

“But, it’s too bad.” Yumi said, stopping over a little.

“Yes?” Noticing what she was doing, Tōko stood up a bit on tiptoe. Because they danced better with balance, they returned to walking along at the same height.

“Well, because Tōko-chan joined the folk dance in order to be able to dance with Sachiko-sama, didn’t you?”

“Eh? Ah... Well, yes. Really, it is regrettable.” As Tōko-chan’s unclear answer floated in the air, it became time for a partner change.

After Tōko-chan, it was some first-year she didn’t know. As expected, it couldn’t continue to be people she was acquainted with.

Clank, clank, like a robot, her new partner took her hand, silent until she couldn’t put up with it and suddenly opened her mouth.

“Y...Yumi-sama.”

“Y...yes-” Inadvertently answering the same way.

“Since I first entered school, I’ve been a fan of Yumi-sama. So, when I saw you enter the circle to dance with Rosa Chinensis, I thought that this was my chance. Although you’re reserved, being with you feels like spring water flowing down from the stage, and... And...” at the peak of nervousness, she returned to being a robot.

“Thank you. That makes me happy.” Unlike so many of the people who wanted to dance with Sachiko-sama, who were forced into the role of the man, like Tōko-chan, that was not why she had joined. To think that she had joined specifically to dance with Yumi really did make her happy.

“Didn’t you know? There are many Yumi-sama fans.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

The Oklahoma medley finished. The piece that continued was “**Korobushka**”

And, Rei-sama turned towards her.

“Yumi-chan, it’s been a while.”

“Yes.”

It’s been a while. Greeting her as if she was a companion that she hadn’t just not seen in a very little while, she gestured for Yumi’s hand as she spoke. Last year Rei-sama had been her partner in the dance scene in the play. Therefore, they fit... Although in saying that, there was a difference in a waltz and a folk dance.

However, as expected of Mr. Lillian. When she met her gaze, it did feel a bit like dancing with a guy.

When she said farewell to Rei, she encountered another face she knew. Another diminutive stature, small, pale body. However, the fighting spirit inside was clearly visible in her eyes. And the trademark braids.

“Yoshino-san, why did you take the man’s part?” Yumi pointed to her partner of a moment ago, Rei-sama, as she asked. Tōko-chan’s reason would not be applicable to this pair. Yoshino-san gazed over at Rei-sama with a glance that said, “Don’t you understand?” and said, “Dancing with Rei-chan is over in a moment isn’t it? Then you separate and move on to another person. Don’t you think it’s better to be next to the person looking on them with eyes shining? The dance itself becomes the dance you are doing with them.”

That’s totally Yoshino-san. All she would have had to say to Rei-sama is one word, “Dance.”

“But you more like you’re worried than you’re looking on her gladly.”

“Well, yeah. I want to make sure that those students who have a one-sided thing for Rei-chan are preemptively braked.”

“With Yoshino-san right next to her, no one is going to do anything.”

“Exactly.”

However, instead of stopping Rei-sama from dancing, she was allowing a little service for the Rei-sama fans.

Yumi, who was totally far away from Sachiko-sama, thought about it for a moment. Whose hand was she holding now. Strangely, she wasn't jealous. Wherever Sachiko-sama was, all was well. She was still in the near vicinity. That their hearts were connected, this confirmed that easily.

But, what if. If they were separated and far apart, could these feelings be continued? When Onee-sama graduated, would that be the graduation of her sister as well? After all, Shimako-san had already seen off her onee-sama, which Yumi thought remarkable.

Although they were both second-years, she wasn't sure she could follow her example.

However, Shimako-san was always two or three steps ahead of Yumi, and wasn't easy at all to catch up with.

Part 4.

When it became one o'clock, the afternoon part began.

As soon as lunch was over, the points were counted and put into keeping for the hard events. The awards for participation were put out and gave the feeling of menu of fun things had started.

First of all, the "Faculty Relay."

The teams were arranged by curriculum, so the athletic teachers were given a 2-kilometer handicap. In this event, with his head thrown back in an air of superiority, the teacher of social studies was already sweating , the science teacher who appeared weak was unexpectedly fast, why did the level of tension go up when the teachers of foreign languages arrived, it was always interesting to catch a glimpse of this aspect of the teachers one saw every day, wasn't it?

Continuing on was the "Hakama race." The premise was simple enough - one by one the runners run wearing the hakama for 100 meters. Simple, but one of the best-loved events. The reason was that participation was restricted to sœur. It becomes a memory shared by those sisters, and people can watch them and say "those two are sœur", and as sœur their breaths were in synch, which made it something that was looked forward to.

All the people who wanted to participate were gathered, lining up in the groups they were running in, when suddenly a broadcast flowed over them.

"Calling the following: Third year Matsu Group Ogasawara Sachiko-san, second year Matsu Group Fukuzawa Yumi-san."

The two, who were relaxing in the Green team area looked at each other when they heard their names called. What was it?

However, the announcement wasn't done.

"Third year Kiku Group Hasekura Rei-san, second-year Matsu Group Shimazu Yoshino-san, second-year Fuji Group Tōdō Shimako-san, first-year Tsubaki Group Nijō Noriko-san. You are urgently needed at trackside." In conclusion, the Rosa Chinensis, Rosa Foetida and Rosa Gigantea sisters were being called.

Not having a clue why, the six responded to the call, coming from different areas to form a line. When they were seen entering the track, from outside the track a great cheer went up.

“Thank you very much. You were called on by no less than everyone. That the entire Yamayurikai should participate in this year’s hakama race, the Sports Festival Executive Committee received so many requests, they had a discussion about it.”

“A discussion about that. Nothing ever reached my ears.” Yoshino muttered. Apparently the Sports Festival Executive Committee had been in active service, advancing this while keeping it secret from her.

“So this is a special nomination from everyone to humbly request that you participate. Will you do so?”

Sigh -

Before the actual people involved could say whether they would or not, from the outfield came a lively ruckus. Every team’s cheering section was jeering at them “Nyah nyah.”

“...That’s unfair.” Said Yoshino-san, clicking her tongue.

“What an overbearing way of handling this, it’s really uncomfortable,” commented Sachiko-sama. However.

“I guess that after all this, there’s no possibility of us returning to our seats without doing anything, is there?” At Reisama’s drily whispered words, the remaining three who objected nodded. On the other hand, this seemed interesting. And Yumi did not appear to be the only one who thought so. Saying, “It can’t be helped, “ Sachiko-sama put a smile upon her face. Yoshino-san rolled up the cuffs of her tracksuit, full of “bring it on”. Shimako-san and Noriko-chan, although they, as always, did not display their emotions upon their faces, didn’t look like they were “I absolutely don’t want to do it.”

So basically, the members of the Yamiyurikai hurried to become part of the “Hakama race.”

Just being together was not only what made it interesting, it was the crowd in which one was paired up.

Sachiko-sama and Yumi weren't an especially new couple, immediately in front of them was Katsura-san and her onee-sama, in front of them was Yoshino-san and Rei-sama.

As one pair started, the next would stand by with the hakama. Three pairs would have hakama ready to use, and the fourth would use the one the first pair returned with. Because one was busy getting ready, one didn't really watch the running ahead of them, but side glances showed soeurs running in such different ways that it was deeply interesting.

Like, here there was a pair in which the onee-sama swaggered. Like the imouto was being pampered slightly. Like their breaths were evenly matched. Like today, these two had had a fight. One could understand this easily in 100 meters of running. In one hundred soeur relationships, there would be 100 ways of relating.

"Rei's team is running." At Sachiko-sama's words, Yumi's hand stopped tying and she looked up. Their start was a little relaxed, but slowly they accelerated.

In an event like this, having a partner whose body was as close as possible to one's own was an advantage however, beanpole Rei-sama and shorty Yoshino-san were running, bam bam, as if there was no difference at all.

Participating suddenly, with no time for practice, their breath came evenly. There were no worried looks visible between them or calling out to see if the other was all right. They ran together as if they were running alone. Upon seeing this, Yumi knew that tears flowed from her eyes.

She remembered something Yoshino-san had said just before her heart surgery. I want to walk shoulder to shoulder with Rei-chan, Yoshino-san had said. Every time Rei-chan had lent her her shoulder, or carried her piggyback, she had hated it.

But now, Yoshino-san ran side by side with Rei-sama without her assistance, with her own power, she pounded the earth.

But even though that was it, her tears wouldn't stop. Thank god, thank god, kept being said inside her heart as Yoshino-san headed for the goal tape. Sachiko-sama put her arm around Yumi's shoulder and drew her close. Instead of asking why she cried, she said, "We'll also do our best, right?"

"Yes—" Wiping the tears away, Yumi stepped forward. The group in front of them were starting. One hakama, left and right.

In a place that two people cannot be simultaneously, there could only be one person with Sachiko-sama. That that should be her brought her great joy.

"Take your position." The teacher with the pistol's voice could be heard clearly.

Wondering what kind of sour they might appear in other people's eyes, Yumi waited for the moment they started.

Part 5.

Now then, the different teams picked out first-, second- and third-years with talent for the ‘Large Jump Rope’ event that was to begin. From each class, seven students for a total of 21 would skip a large rope. 2 of those would spin the rope, the remaining 19 would be the jumpers. At the command, they would run in one at a time into the middle, and the team that could jump the longest was the winner.

Students that disliked participating in the relay or the scavenger hunt race would choose this race or “Rush Hour.” Tsutako-san was a jumper, Mami-san was chosen as the trainer. “Rush Hour” by the way, was an event in which five students were crammed into a cardboard box and had to travel 30 meters and back.

“After all, it could be compared with the back of an acorn.” Holding up the “Hakama Race” first place prize of a notebook with an embossed school seal, Yoshino-san said with a flustered face.

The Large Jump Rope was over, the second-years’ choice for “Rush Hour” over, and also the first-years’ “Three People Gable”, and they stood gazing at the scoreboard.

“For most events, Green team and Red team are monopolizing the lower ranks. Yellow team has as much as 100 points difference, can you believe it. I’m miserable but no tears are coming.”

With the exception of Red and Green teams, the others had scores that had broken into three digits. Shining especially brightly was the Yellow team with 160 points written there.

“There’s four events remaining? Um, to win the championship.” Her face flushed as if she was turning serious, Yoshino-san began her barren calculations.

“Even if we come in first in all the events, I wonder if there’s any possibility of Green team winning, is there?”

“But, if Yellow team came in last place in all of them, right?” Yumi said, while jotting something down with the pencil she had won for third place in the “Hakama Race” (also engraved with the school seal.) That the until now top runner Yellow team would fail to take even a single point in any of the remaining events was close to zero.

Whether it be by twenty points or five, it would basically need a miracle to defeat a team that had a 100-point lead. It’s true that you never know until you try, but sometimes it is possible to know even if you don’t.

“First things first. Yumi-san, do your best on the ‘Scavenger Hunt Race’.”

“Of course I’ll do my best, but, y’know...”

But, speaking of the “Scavenger Hunt Race”, that’s probably controlled by fortune. Yoshino-san could say what she wants, but that was the real chance of success. If fortune was good, you drew a good item and were heading for the goal while the other people wandered around. Fast legs weren’t what won this.

“Okay then, I’m o-ff!”

After the now-starting third-years’ “Fan Dance” then Yumi’s main event, the “Scavenger Hunt Race” would begin.

Geez. If Sachiko-sama went to the Green team cheering section, she’d be too late to see her finish the race. So she moved slowly, taking a long look, trying to see if she’d run into her at the entrance gate. She could hear the music come. At last, the “Fan Dance” had begun.

Purple, Yellow, Red, Blue, Gray and Green fans were opened with a “Flip”. Sachiko-sama had said that she had a purple fan, so Yumi’s gaze turned towards the grouping of purple.

And there she was.

From a distance she found it her, a little mysteriously easily. Sachiko-sama didn't have features that attracted attention. Anyway, from this distance, it was too small to see.

Maybe since she was an imouto, she was able to locate her quickly. Wherever, whatever the reason was, the reason wasn't something she could express but, there was no helping it.

Among the third-years' "Folding Fan Dance" there was one person wearing school uniform.

Whose fault was it? In the middle of a sports festival where everyone was the same, this had the feel of someone dancing for god, gazing up to the sky.

(This is bad, this is bad)

Once again, her eyes filled with tears. Yumi went behind the entrance gate to the path, and turned towards the water fountain next to the gymnasium. She wanted to watch Onee-sama's dance until the very end, but with her vision blurred by tears, what else could she do? Quickly wash her face and pull herself together for the "Scavenger Hunt Race."

When she arrived at the water fountain there was someone already there.

"Itsue-san?"

"Y, Yumi-san..." With a big movement up and down of her shoulders, Itsue-san turned to look over her shoulder.

"Ah, yeah. I, something got in my eye."

"I need to gargle my mouth. The grounds are really dusty, huh?"

There was no reason for either of them to give a reason for coming to the water fountain, but seeing each other in such a bad situation, they both reacted out of confusion.

"Then, I'll go." Itsue-san left the space to Yumi and quit the scene quickly. There were four taps. If they stood side by side, they could have both used two each. "Itsue-san...?" Looking behind her, Yumi shook her head.

What a strange way of walking. What was weird about it, after a moment, became obvious. On the right foot, only the toes were in her sneakers, like she was wearing slippers, walking with a pull.

“But, why are you walking with one shoe off, I wonder?”

The reason she was walking strangely was understood but, the reason for it all was not.

The music ceased and applause sounded. The “Fan Dance” was over.

“Ah, that’s not good.” Yumi quickly made her way back, retracing her steps.

However, she had never washed her face.

Part 6.

The “Scavenger Hunt Race”.

That is where sweat and tears and sighs and laughter are made. Like the previously run “Bread Eating Race”, after the start, one ran twenty meters, and, in order of arrival, found a piece of paper attached to a cord, confirmed the contents, upon which was written a subject which you had to search for around in the grounds, and then, take it to the goal - this was a rigorous contest.

Well, when we say “laughter” we don’t mean the laughter of the chosen participants, it was inevitable that the audience would be laughing at the participants. Although that most people kept the event at a distance for such a reason, it could be said that among people who want a good laugh, it is a popular event. For instance, the entire second-year membership of the rakugo club said that they’d participate.

Now, as for the contents of the borrowed things. Because they could be as small as an eraser, as large as a person, there was considerable breadth. However, since this was a school Sports festival, there were, sensibly, certain restrictions within the rules.

In other words, (not that anyone would bring these to this place in any case) poisonous snakes, or poisonous spiders would be rejected as dangerous.

And while not dangerous, something like a duralumin case with 100 million yen rolls of notes or something like that, is not something that would normally be found in a school.

Right, right, the most important things will be ones that exist in two or more in the area. So something that says “XX-sensei” doesn’t exist. Because XX-sensei may have gone off to the toilet, and one would wander around for how long looking for them, which would be a pain. So if there are more than one of a thing, even if one is lost, there’s a chance to find another. At lunchtime, when Mami-san was wandering around, she had been identifying items in advance, determining if they were suitable.

“Everyone here, please assist the participants by offering your items cheerfully. Even if it is an opposing team, we appreciate your cooperation.” The broadcast spread out, and at last it was time to start.

“I’m a little excited.” At the sound of the voice, Yumi turned to look over her shoulder to see standing in the line of the Purple team was Shimako, who chuckled.

“Shimako-san, you were pushed into this event too?”

Shimako-san and the “Scavenger Hunt Race.” Their images were a little far apart, when suddenly the idea of Yoshino-san was suddenly contagious.

“No, I announced my candidacy. But, why? What do you mean by ‘too’?”

“Ah, nothing.” There was no way to respond to that why. No good explanation she could make. It was probably better if she didn’t try and explain, she shouldn’t wonder.

However, Shimako-san dared to run in the “Scavenger Hunt Race”, perhaps it was a burden that she could willingly shoulder, since she doubted that it would corrupt the image of the “Fuji Musume.” --No, it was really unlikely.

While they were chatting, the event proceeded. Those who started before Yumi and the others had run off before in the direction of the family seats or the student cheering sections, frequently with a shout.

“Please lend me your glasses.”

“Does anyone have a novel?”

Yeah, those would be pretty easy to procure. Upon seeing the contents of the envelope, some of the participants rushed madly ahead, not to the goal, but to the exit gate, trying to run away home with no confidence... Not, their aim was the just-finished third-year dancers. Having successfully received yellow folding fans, they then stampeded directly from the exit gate to the goal.

Wavering, then heading for the Green team area to find Yoshino-san, some of the participants were searching for a “notebook with the school seal.” Equally, so were the people looking for “a winner of the “Hakama Race,” and Yoshino-san came to mind first. At a glance, that particular participant was Tanuma Chisato-san. Yoshino-san unwillingly handed over her notebook.

Some of the borrowed items were people. For instance, “An elementary school teacher”.

Or, for instance, “A person with their hair dyed brown.”

Inside might say, “A person with pierced ears” or “Someone wearing sneakers.”

And while the sweat and tears and laughter of the “Scavenger Hunt Race” proceeded, next up was Yumi and Shimako-san’s turn.

So, with a fighting yell, do your best. Having decided previously with **janken** they took a direct line when the time came, Yumi suddenly sighed “Ahhhhh” with a voice full of despair as if the world was about to end.

Seeing what “it” was, Shimako-san, who had just before admitted to being excited, flushed, then went pale.

“Sh...Shimako-san?”

Following her glance towards the track where a skinheaded priest stood, clapping his hands rhythmically for Yellow team participants.

“No way, that person...”

“...My father.”

Standing peacefully at the goal, stood a middle-aged man in a priest’s stole, waving hugely. However, there was no way that the paper read ‘Priest’ she thought.

“The subject is, ‘A person wearing Japanese clothes,’ correct.”

Shortly after the participant got to the goal, a broadcast was made. Certainly, a priest was wearing Japanese clothes. However.

“Why?” Shimako-san said, as if it was squeezed out of her.

There were plenty of women wearing crested kimono, why did they pick her father? Why had her father complied? Why was her father at a Catholic school wearing the uniform of another religion? Why...?

Although all the words that came after Shimako-san's "why" were Yumi's imagination, she felt that she really didn't know, nor did Yumi know the answer. However, the first "why" was soon established.

"Why did you choose to wear these clothes today?" They were holding an interview with the person who had contributed to first place.

"The truth is, I just came from a Buddhist funeral ceremony. I just wanted to see how my daughter was doing before going home... No, I really just wanted to participate. Ha ha ha..." Slapping his cheeks heartily, he laughed.

(Is that person really Shimako-san's father?)

There was no resemblance at all. However.

Still not having taken her subject into her hands, Shimako-san wrapped her hands around her face. "I guess so" she could do nothing but give her consent.

The interview was over, and the next set of subjects were set, at last Yumi's turn had arrived.

At the sound of the pistol, she dashed. There were six contestants who all grabbed an envelope at roughly the same time.

Please let me get something easy. Praying, Yumi pulled out the paper from the envelope. Opening the twice-folded paper, there were the following characters written.

|-----| | A man wearing a suit | |-----|

...Eh?

"Is there such a thing today?" Yumi wondered out loud. Suits at a sports festival. And restricted to a man. A person wearing traditional clothes would have been less difficult.

"Yumi-chan, go for it!"

(Awww, Dad.)

As soon as her glance turned towards the parents' seats, she regretted it. She wished she had let her father wear a suit. But, she could not have dreamed this would happen.

It was certainly too late to say such a thing now. What was most important now was to run off and find a man wearing a suit.

(Suit, suit... Um)

Giving the usually dandy teachers a proper up and down, it was decided that today they were pretty rough. There definitely weren't several possible applicants appearing for the subject, as she looked impatiently. Thinking that at the end, jersey shirts were everywhere, suits were pretty awful, and this would be impossible.

Still of the other five who had started with her, not one had made it to the goal yet.

"So-and-so has one, come here," the voices came, she could heard them but, in Yumi's position, her object was a person, wearing something specific, and someone standing there calling out that "there's someone wearing a suit" would be really strange.

"Yumi, what is your subject? Tell me." Leaning her body forward, Sachiko-sama cried out. Finally, students were passing through the family seating and starting to come out.

"Um, e..." Just as she was about to respond, she noticed it, far away, behind Onee-sama. "Excuse me, Onee-sama. We'll talk later." She crossed the rope and entered the cheering section, disregarding dumbfounded Onee-sama and her classmates and walked step by step towards the very tail end of the ridge. Her aim was standing by the edge of the painted Green team sign.

"Please."

Standing there was a middle-aged man, to whom she bowed her head. This man who wore a black suit, was surprised for a moment, when she showed him the piece of paper with the subject, agreed pleasantly.

“If we go now, we might win.” The man held out his hand to Yumi. He was the same generation as her father, so she wasn’t opposed to taking the hand of this complete stranger.

Cutting across the cheering section bleachers for the second time, she returned to the track and aimed at the goal. Shimako held a canteen in her hand and running, shaking off the goal. Anyway, that was done, but there was still something to do.

“Today, you’re wearing a suit.” The interviewer asked.

“The truth is, I just came directly from a wedding. I wanted to catch a glimpse of my daughter before I went home...” It was pretty much the same exact answer as before.

A Buddhist marriage.

Today was Sunday, so most of the fathers had many plans piled up on top of one another.

Well, cooperation in the “Scavenger Hunt Race” would make a nice memento.

While the man in the suit was on the side of the goal receiving a ballpoint pen with the school seal from the members of the Sports Festival Executive Committee, Yumi waited and called out.

“Thank you very much, you really saved me.”

“I was able to help? Then, I’m glad.”

Seeing his bright smile, there was somehow the feeling of this not being the first time they’d met. Yumi felt as if she should recall with an “ah, yes, right”. Apart from the Japanese gestures, there was something foppish about his speech that she remembered from somewhere.

About how old he was, he wasn’t as sarcastic, there wasn’t enough of a sample to see. No... it was different from Kashiwagi’s sarcastic way of speaking. – Or you could say that in this case it had become domesticated.

“You’re exactly as I’ve heard about, Yumi-chan.”

“Huh?”

“Come visit again. We can talk leisurely.”

“Ummmm.”

Where were they going to go? Her head was spinning around. But how could she be “just as he’d heard” when this is the first time they’d ever seen each other.

But, this person knew her. It wasn’t the first time Yumi had met him. Ah, but then, her name was sewn on her gym clothes, he probably just saw it there.

No no, he had clearly called her “Yumi-chan” not “Fukuzawa-san”. Only the last name was there.

So, why did he know her given name? Roll, roll, her mind spun around and around back to the beginning.

And then.

“Uncle.”

Whether it was timely help or a big interruption, she didn’t know, but with her usual impeccable timing, a young girl with banana curl hair made an appearance.

“Hello, Tōko-chan. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? You should come by occasionally.”

“Well, from time to time I do drop by your home for a visit. But Uncle is busy and rarely there.”

“That’s harsh.”

Even as he said it, he looked like a happy “Uncle.” Because Tōko-chan had come by, “I don’t know who this gentleman is and don’t know how to cope” was put on hold for a moment, to see if their conversation held some kind of a hint, so that she would not be left, standing and gaping.

At which point, a new person joined them.

It was Sachiko-sama.

“Father.”

“Father!?”

At hearing that word, Yumi blurted out a repetition. Father, Father... She said Father. Um, in other words.

Yes, Sachiko-sama nodded.

“My father.”

“Correct. I’m Sachiko’s father, Ogasawara Tooru.”

No way, he was introducing himself to his daughter’s little sister with his full name. In addition, he had a smile like a youthful star.

“So, you mean the reason I was chosen wasn’t because Yumi-chan knew who I was?” Sachiko’s father asked with something in his face that looked like regret.

Sorry. He was the first person she saw that was wearing a suit.

But, it was possible to say that she had never seen a picture and therefore didn’t know that he was Sachiko-sama’s father. Although the “Ogasawara” written above his jacket breast pocket might have been a give away if she had thought about it.

“Ah, that was it. It would be nice if you call me Tooru-ojisama, you already call my wife Sayako-obasama, right?”

Tooru-ojisama and Sayako-obasama. Ah, exactly like festival dolls lined up in front of a folding screen.

“At any rate, why are you here? Weren’t you at a wedding ceremony?” Sachiko-sama asked.

“Uh oh, I’ve slacked too long.” Tooru-ojisama cried out as he looked at his wristwatch. He totally, halfway through the reception, slipped out of the hall. About now, surely Sayako-obasama would begin worry about Tooru-ojisama.

“Sachiko, please keep this a secret from your grandfather. He’d be so jealous. Well, then.” With these words, the gentleman in the suit went out the back of the grounds. That shape aimed at the most suitable place.

“And that’s how you were introduced to him, for the first time...” Seeing her father off, Sachiko-sama heaved a huge sigh.

Really.

Not to be defeated, Yumi sighed equally as heavily.

Joker, Anchor

Part 1.

The first-years' elective "Obstacle Course Race" was over, the third-years' elective "Dress-Up Relay" was just about to begin when it came to light.

"What happened, Itsue-san...?!" Yoshino-san cried out, which made the students in the Green team area turn around to look. Hearing her unusual tone of voice, the students gathered around Yoshino-san and Itsue-san.

"What is it?"

"Look, here." Yoshino-san took Itsue-san's right foot and instantly it was apparent that she couldn't move it.

"Ah-"

When they saw the bared ankle, no one said a word. The ankle was tight and tense, red and swollen. By the time you reached the instep, her shoes couldn't even be tied.

"...In the club relay?" Yoshino-san inquired. Itsue-san nodded silently. At that moment, large tears fell from her eyes, but the tears weren't from the pain.

"I'm sorry, Yoshino-san. Really, I'm very sorry."

"Don't be silly. You should have said something sooner, instead of letting it get like this."

"I didn't want to tell you." Itsue-san looked up, her face puffy with tears.

"Am I that much of an ogre?" Yoshino-san smiled bitterly.

"Not at all. I, at the time we were deciding who was going to participate in the relay, I was all full of myself, wasn't I? So, when I sprained my ankle in the club relay, I couldn't bring myself to speak humbly, could I?"

So, basically, that was the "meaning of participation" for Itsue-san. However, when she hurt her foot, she began to brood over her participation. At the time Yumi met her at the water fountain, she was attempting to conceal the affected part.

“That’s enough. Can someone please help get Itsue-san to Eiko-sensei at the first aid tent?” The sooner the better.”

“Ah, right. We’ll do it.” Two of her classmates lifted Itsue-san to her feet, who shook them off and stepped out in front of them to face Yoshino-san head on.

“Go ahead and blame me, Yoshino-san! Get angry at this useless track and field person!”

“I have no interest in hurting a wounded classmate.”

“Is that pity? It would be better to have your blame!”

Desperately, Itsue-san spat out reckless remarks, which seemed to click with Yoshino-san.

“Then stop whining and get over to the First Aid tent! I’m busy, I have to find a person to replace you as a runner, file a participant registration form as per procedure, and more importantly, I still have to run. I don’t have time to look after a spoiled child.”

After being presented with such a sound argument, Itsue-san was silent; as Yoshino-san had commanded, she headed to the back of the cheering section for medical treatment.

Yumi, who had seen everything from beginning to end, thought that Yoshino-san was pretty cool. She had said what had to be said, and it all felt as if it were tied up tight with her “I’ll leave it to you.”

That is the Yoshino-san who will handle the Yamayurikai. There’s no way to know what the outcome of the Student Council Elections could possibly be, but it definitely seemed to appear that they’d face many hardships together.

“Now then, we need a person to run instead of Itsue-san. Is there a person here who will announce their candidacy, or not?” While speaking, Yoshino-san looked back and forth. “This is a state of emergency, so I’ll nominate someone. Uh, Michiyo-san.”

Yoshino-san called upon the fleet classmate who had carried their white arrow. However, Michiyo-san when called, neither said “yes”, nor “no.” This was because she was not there.

“Huh, where’s Michiyo-san? She was just sitting here a moment ago.”

Yoshino-san turned her head around in every direction looking. Yumi too, because she certainly remembered that Michiyo-san had been there just a little before.

“...No way. She ran away?”

“You’re mistaken, Yoshino-san. Michiyo-san followed Itsue-san.” One of their classmates instructed.

“Ah, okay.”

There was no time for someone to follow, get her and lead her back. The entire situation washed over Yoshino-san’s face. Her gaze moved across everyone, as they cast down their eyes.

It was true. No one wanted to go out for the relay. They had already participated in events and weren’t ready to run for this one. Even if they had some self-confidence in their running, no one felt that they could take track and field-er Itsue-san’s place at all.

“In these circumstances, all you’d have to be able to do is hold on to the baton and run. If you’re not fast, it’s all right.”

From each class, two names, from three years each make six people. And the people who were invited to participate abstained from any vote.

“If it’s all right to not be fast...”

“Yes?”

The students of second-year Matsu Group looked at each other hesitantly. Even if Yoshino-san said it was okay, there were the third-years and first-years of Green team, who were even now that probably the important points of this affair were being communicated in the cheering section, were already gathering at the entrance gate, surely intending to win. Just being able to run wasn’t what they were thinking.

“Someone, please.” No hands went up. A general atmosphere of thought floated about the vicinity.

Bad luck happened to be present in that place. They had just begun to grieve when Tsutako-san turned towards them, the camera shutter clicking and it could be seen that she looked awfully happy about it.

While this was going on, the “Dress-up Relay” hit midpoint. The runner before the anchor, Sachiko-sama, was standing up, getting ready. Wait, there wasn’t time to stand here chuckling.

“I understand.” Yoshino-san nodded. And for a second grabbed Yumi by the hand.

“W...what?”

“I’m just going to have to use the Joker, there’s no helping it. I’m going with Yumi-san.”

Going with, she says.

“Ehhhhh-!?”

“Be surprised later. Now, come on.”

Okay Yoshino-san, sheesh. Let go of the hand and I’ll walk behind you. There was no reason to drag her body behind, banging her hand, Yumi’s legs reluctantly following after Yoshino-san.

Halfway, Yoshino-san stopped at the Sports Festival Executive Committee tent HQ, to apply for a participant change.

In place of Karube Itsue, Fukuzawa Yumi.

The procedure was taken care of all too quickly and simply, and eventually Yumi was registered as a member of the relay.

“Yoshino-san, please remember this.”

Certainly, Yumi had thought that she would endure many hardships together with Yoshino-san.

However, this was not one of them.

Part 2.

Around the back of the entrance gate, when Kanako-chan saw Yumi, she looked at her as if to say “Are you serious?”

“Ah, there was an accident.”

“Yeah, but Green team’s relay representatives are Rosa Foetida en bouton and Yumi-sama... Are you trying to throw away a victory?”

Each time, that detestable mouth. Because it was so vexing, Yumi had to boast a little on her own behalf.

“Because I’m the secret weapon the team was keeping it secret from everyone. Hey, you watch at the beginning when I expose my speed.”

“Is that so?” Kanako-chan asked, smiling. “You’re the anchor, huh.”

“Uh - “ Yumi’s words were stifled. That’s right. Because the switch of participants was done so quickly, the order in which they were to run hadn’t been changed. Therefore, as Yumi was to fill the hole left by Itsue-san, even if she were to cry about it, she was about to be the anchor.

“At any rate, I give you a warm welcome on behalf of the Red team. With this, we’ll be able to escape last place.”

Between these two teams the spread was 115 points to 100. The Green team led slightly. But the relay, the great bird, was awarded twice the usual points. Fifty points could put a team in first place, and depending on their order of arrival, the places could be changed quite simply.

“A direct confrontation, I’m looking forward to it.” Kanako-chan smiled boldly and went to join the tail end of the Red team.

“A direct confrontation... No way.”

But it did look like Kanako-chan was the anchor. Before even running, Yumi felt a little tired.

The contestants for the relay were beginning to move onto the track, from the meeting areas, there was the sound of applause and cheers. This event would bring the place order to a final and binding position, so each team put their energy into cheering.

“When I get within 2 meters, begin your dash. At the time of the pass, the sign will be when you turn your head over your shoulder. Take it with your right hand, and once you have it, don’t switch hands.”

The runner before the anchor, the leader of the Pep Squad, repeated what she had said. At which Yumi realized that she alone had had no practice at taking the baton.

“When I have it, I can’t change hands, is that right?” Back in primary school, she had practices for the graduation relay, she was pretty certain that she could switch hands after she took it.

“If you switch, there’ll be a loss of time, and there’s the danger of dropping it. If you were experienced, or faster, or ran easily, there’s lots of differing opinions on this but, since you’re the last runner and there’s no need to pass it to anyone else, don’t switch.”

“Okay.” She nodded, becoming very uneasy. Really, she was about to do the relay, really.

“It’ll be all right.” The Squad leader slapped her on the shoulder. “Yumi-chan can see that things have gotten too far to stop. It may be rude to say it, but, no one has any real expectations of you. Since they learned that Itsue-san sprained her ankle and pulled out, everyone has half given up.”

It seemed as if she could relax a little, even if she understood that she was just being taken care of. But Yumi nodded obediently.

“Eh, that’s no good. Because if you give up from the beginning, there’s no way to avoid coming in last. Our aim should be the top.”

Although it was 99% impossible, the remaining percent was offered as a prize. There was no easy way to run away.

Running away was the number one thing Sachiko-sama disliked.

“...That’s true. It’s as Yumi-chan says. Let’s give it everything we’ve got until we drop.”

“Yes~” This time she nodded with energy. The first runners moved into position.

For the Yellow team, Rei-sama moved out. For Green team too, it was a third-year.

As she had heard, the first runner was, like the anchor, an important running position. The power comes from the starting dash, and then the second and third legs only have to aim at keeping the lead.

The pistol sounded and all at once they started.

The first leg runners were, not surprisingly, all the type who flew out.

“Rei-sama-” From outside the Yellow team, the sounds of her fans’ voices came.

The second leg runners took their positions to take the baton, for the quick Yellow, Purple, Green, White, Pink, Red. In any case, they had eaten into one of the good spots so negligence was forbidden. Still only one person ran at a time and there was no difference for any leg. At which point the second person in this problem, Yoshino-san, appeared.

Yoshino-san who was participating in an event of this kind for the very first time. Her interests were sporting events, but she was still someone who was firmly in the corner with those who did not know how to handle a baton, Yumi suppressed that main point firmly. However, she had come late to the basics of running. For years she had never been in a footrace. How to run, how to run well, she might not even remember. In this case, even though their position was lowered, there wasn’t even one complaint from the Green team. It was as the Squad leader had said, everyone had basically been resigned to it. If there hadn’t been a penalty game associated with it, then Yumi wondered if she wouldn’t care either.

It might be totally different when it came to the fourth runner. With a little switching of the order of the runners at the beginning, which person would grab the baton, the level of the team might be high, and maybe a little savings could have been made, became something that could now be seen.

Yellow team was running alone. After that was Purple team, White team, Pink team followed along like a dumpling, after a little space was Red team and a little further back was Green team.

It was vexing, but the space between first place Yellow and last place Green was just over half the track.

“Ah-”

The Red team player had drawn up next to the person from the White team.

“Ohh - “ To the background music of screams and cheers, by just the very tip, the Red team over took them. The order of place changed as Red team sprung into fourth place.

“Yumi-sama, it’s by the skin of your neck, isn’t it.” Kanako-chan smiled.

As they warmed up, the Red team runner increased her speed, this time she had the power to catch the Pink team contestant. And then a moment later, Green team was in last place alone.

“You’re saying that before you even see me running.” Yumi answered. “You don’t really know what will happen when we two run shortly.” This was the utmost bravado.

“Saying “us two” when really if it would be “only two” she wondered, or if it would be “two people, but” would be more likely to be the beginning of the sentence. With four people separating them, it would be most difficult to keep to the business of the two of them.”

But, if she let herself be weak, then she wouldn’t be able to run. Therefore, until they ran, they wouldn’t know, she told herself to bolster her confidence. What if she ran unexpectedly fast.

However, “what could possibly happen” happened.

The baton pass between the Red team fourth and fifth leg failed. There was no way to know whether the mistake was the passer’s or the taker’s. However, for a moment the baton was in neither’s hand, then it fell to the ground and rolled.

It was a repetition of a miss that had happened at lunchtime practice a few days earlier. At this perfect example of the lack of power of concentration, the Pink team somehow got caught in a leak and overtook them as they hurriedly called out.

The fifth leg returned from the dash to pick up the baton, running for the second time with their full power, there was a considerable time loss. While they were running late, the Green team chased them and pulled even with their runner.

“Really,” Kanako-chan muttered, standing and looking down the line of the course. The first to go of the anchors, the Yellow team runner was waiting on standby, the diligent anchor of the club relay for the track and field team, “the Cheetah.” Full of top runners, the Yellow team fifth leg had widened the space between them and second place. Now the baton was passed to the anchor.

The Yellow team anchor’s back quickly became small. Purple team, Pink team’s anchors were now returning to the start. Next was White team. And after that, the next to appear was Green team.

At the start of the fifth leg, the Green and Red team were roughly even. Green team took a bright lead. As she had promised, the Squad leader had run with all her power until she had nothing left.

Yumi and Kanako-chan stood inside.

Come on, come on. After another two meters, as the point approaches, mega-dash.

The sound of the Squad leader’s footsteps were becoming loud, her own footsteps sounded heavy.

“Yumi-chan-” calling out, she held out her left hand.

She did not turn her head to look back. She could feel it against the palm of her hand, reassured, she grabbed it.

Don't switch hands.

As she remembered the Squad leader's words one by one, she knew the pass had gone smoothly.

Because had been efficient, the dash's speed had not been slowed down. It felt like she was running faster than usual, so that was probably the reason.

But, after all, Yumi had average leg length, and an average time as an anchor. She could run with all her might until she dropped, there was no way she was going to have the speed to catch up to a runner with a long stride.

There was only one person behind Yumi.

There was no mistaking it, that person was Kanako-chan. The sound of the person behind her's footsteps gradually became louder. But the goal was still far away in the distance.

When she passed in front of the Green team's cheering area, her teammates cheering reached her from behind. Maybe they were telling her that the Red team anchor was right behind her. But the voices didn't reach her ears. The only things she could hear were Kanako-chan's footsteps.

She saw Sachiko-sama.

In the middle of her energetic teammates, one person stood quietly and watched over Yumi.

So, Yumi ran earnestly. Whether Kanako-chan was there or not didn't matter at all.

Just, hold what has been given into your hands and run until the very end. That was the only objective.

She could then see Kanako-chan running in front of her.

How lovely, she thought.

Part 3.

“Okay. What is it that you want me to do?”

When Yumi arrived at the goal, she said that to Kanako-chan, who still stood there.

Although she was left behind at the end, after the race she felt exhilarated. Because of that, she felt that any penalty game was now surmountable.

Yes, even though she had lost, she was a little high. She was out of breath, but it felt good.

“Yumi-sama.” Kanako-chan walked away together with Yumi. Ah, so she had waited there, she guessed, as she glanced to the side.

“As expected, that went well.”

“What did?” She had said the words of congratulations, but the reason hadn’t flown out to be understandable.

More than her becoming the relay anchor suddenly because of an accident, Kanako-chan left her behind in the last five meters because of her incredible effort. Given their previous agreement, after something like that, that was not the thing that was likeliest to be heard, “that went well.” What on earth, what and how did it go well?

Kanako-chan smiled bitterly. “Shouldn’t the person who did not lose, when thinking about the penalty game describe this as auspicious?”

“Eh?”

She understood the words the person who did not lose, but she was asking for a repetition as the words did not reach her ear because of a loud broadcast transmission.

“The scores have been totaled. Will all the participants from every team gather on the grounds, please.”

“Later.” With a jaunty salutation, Kanako-chan left Yumi. She turned towards the others of the Red team warmly.

“Yumi-san.” There was a slap on her shoulder, looking over her shoulder, Yoshino-san stood there.

“Good work. And also... Thank you.”

“But Kanako-chan left us behind.”

“Don’t say that. Anyway, I became left behind by three people from that standpoint.”

Became, she says.

“From that standpoint, I see.”

“Don’t say it, here-” Yoshino-san, as if in slow motion, did a relaxed jump. Yumi managed to avoid laughing, but Yoshino-san smiled.

If you give it your all, you can smile in the face of despair. Whether one wins or loses the match, it was possible to think that way.

The team lining up in formation was over, followed closely by the ending ceremony. There were a lot of things in that, and time stretched.

“Now for the announcement of the final results.”

Each team’s points had been erased from the board. It had been bared at the beginning of the “Color Opposition Relay” because if they had waited until afterwards, anyone could have told who was the winner.

“First, the overall winner is - “

From the brass band, at the announcement of the winner, came the sound of a snare roll, “dorororororo”. The broadcasting club member took a deep breath and said, “Yellow Team.”

On the board, their points appeared. “275 points.”

The mass of Yellow suddenly boiled up. Even if they were considered the favorite by a lot, and left everyone else far behind, even if the victory was decided before the relay, they were still very happy. Yellow headbands were everywhere thrown into the air.

The sound of the drum roll came before the second place.

“The runner-up is the White team. 215 points.”

The White team that had the jinx of never being in last place. This year, second place was pretty good.

“Third place, Purple team. 205 points.”

As they were announced, one after the other, the points put up on the board.

“Fourth place, Pink team, 190 points.”

As they neared it, Yumi thought that there was no need to put the final one up. The top three were okay, but the teams that didn’t do too good had a sort of puzzled reaction. And really, what’s the difference between fifth and six place. No one wanted to say “Anyway, we’re not last place, banzai”, so why the points for last place.

“Fifth place, Green team. 115 points.”

Hey.

(Fifth place, Green team, they said, whah?)

Looking around her at the atmosphere, her classmates were conservatively delighted. They said that Red team wasn’t fifth place, Yumi was confused.

“What, that’s surprising. We lost in the relay, how did we get 5th place,” Yoshino-san said.

“No way.”

“What will you do if it was?”

“But...”

She had said that the points were doubled in the relay, so that there was a possibility of turning things around.

“There was a fifteen point difference. With the five points of the relay doubled into ten, we may have just squeaked by.” That seemed like backwards calculation, but then the last points were called.

“And the disappointing last place goes to Red team. 110 points.”

“Really...”

The Red team was in last place, but they did not seem too mortified, after having taken down the Green team in the relay. Had they not dropped the baton at that time, they Red team would probably have switched places with them.

Therefore, Green team did not snatch a five point victory by their ability. They were saved by a mistake, could be said. But there was no mistaking it, Green team was one place above Red Team.

Now they would have to listen to the head teacher's complaints, was what they actually felt.

"Phew, thank goodness." A little delayed, she relaxed her chest.

What, at this point, she was pleased, her classmates though she was cracked as a dry bone, but fine.

She wouldn't have to pay the penalty.

That was the one thing she felt relieved about.

Penalty Game Speculation

Part 1.

“It was five points, but a win is a win.” Sachiko-sama said with a smile at the Rose Mansion.

It was lunchtime on the Tuesday after a compensatory holiday. The reverberations of the Sports Festival were still left around the school.

“So you say, but fifth place is still a low rank, no matter how you say it.” Member of the winning team, Rei-sama, muttered with an amazed face. Written on her face was “ah, a low level dispute.”

“Rei, you don’t understand.” Sachiko-sama lifted her cup, enjoying the fragrance of the red tea. Yumi had put in Darjeeling.

“Even if Green team had come in second and Red team took first, I would still have the feeling of defeat.”

“What, Sachiko, for you, “victory” was all against the Red team?” Rei’s eyebrows rose as she asked.

“This time, yes, that is what I meant.” Onee-sama didn’t say anything more than that.

However.

Sachiko-sama didn’t know about the bet with Kanako-chan, Yumi thought. Therefore, why was she only concerned with not losing to the Red team?

Yumi would have to think about this some more.

Part 2.

After school on Wednesday.

As promised, Kanako-chan was to come to the Rose Mansion to help out with the School Festival.

Not just Kanako-chan, Tōko-chan was also coming along, although the circumstances of her doing so were not clear.

Also from the same class, Noriko-chan inclined her neck.
“Tōko-chan, what about Theater Club practice?”

“It’s all right. Surely I can do both.” And she didn’t mean just for today, but until the School Festival, it seemed.

“If we don’t have enough hands, we can always call upon Tōko-chan.”

As always, that was enough to set Tōko-chan off.

“Kanako-chan, do you have a second,” Yumi’s voiced called out, leading Kanako-chan out to the hallway.

“What if you have to be alone with Tōko-chan? Can you do that?” She asked as they walked, squeak, squeak, down the stairs. If she said that she had no patience and would dislike it, she would need to do some adjustment. As obnoxious as it was, Kanako-chan and Tōko-chan were natural enemies.

But Kanako-chan lightly said, “Tight speculation about the penalty game, was there?”

As soon as Yumi heard the words penalty game, Yumi recalled. “That’s right, isn’t it? If Kanako-chan had won, will you tell me what kind of penalty would you have had me do?”

“Isn’t it a good thing that in the end I lost?”

Is it a good thing, she said. The more it was concealed, the more interested she was.

“Be a good girl.”

Halfway down the stairs, she could feel a tickle under her arm. Then Kanako-chan shouted, “If I say, will you please stop,” she entreated. This was a good hand for a first-year to play.

“Then, what is it?”

“...A photograph.”

“Eh?”

“A “two-shot” photograph is what I wanted... Of Yumi-sama and me,” she muttered, fading out on the last words.

“Why such a thing?”

Having imagined great things, this was honestly a little bit of a letdown.

But, if you thought about it, doing this together is Kanako-chan’s way of repealing her role as a ghost on the back.

“Mmm, okay.”

“Really?” Kanako-chan’s eyes glittered. Taking this with her beloved “Yumi-sama” made her happy, she was casting off her skin.

“However, the condition is that you have to help out until the School Festival.”

“That’s the inducement, huh.”

“Of course. I’m the winner, you’re the loser.” But, by five points. That wasn’t much of a difference to win by. Yumi opened the door and resignedly breathed in the outside air.

Having heard her losing companion’s wish, she felt thankful.

Because, once again, she was able to spend time with Kanako-chan. She let her thoughts hurry up and slow.

Ready, bang.

In her heart, she could hear the sound of a pistol marking the start of a new relationship.

